

HOME CINEMA

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Choice



Hi-def style icon
John Lewis shakes up the TV world, p38

THE UK'S BEST MOVIE ROOMS

→ LUXURY CINEMAS THAT'LL BLOW YOU AWAY

The future of Ultra HD

What you need to know about 4K TV

Soundbars: Give your TV a boost!

Sonos, Samsung, Sony, Pioneer and more reviewed

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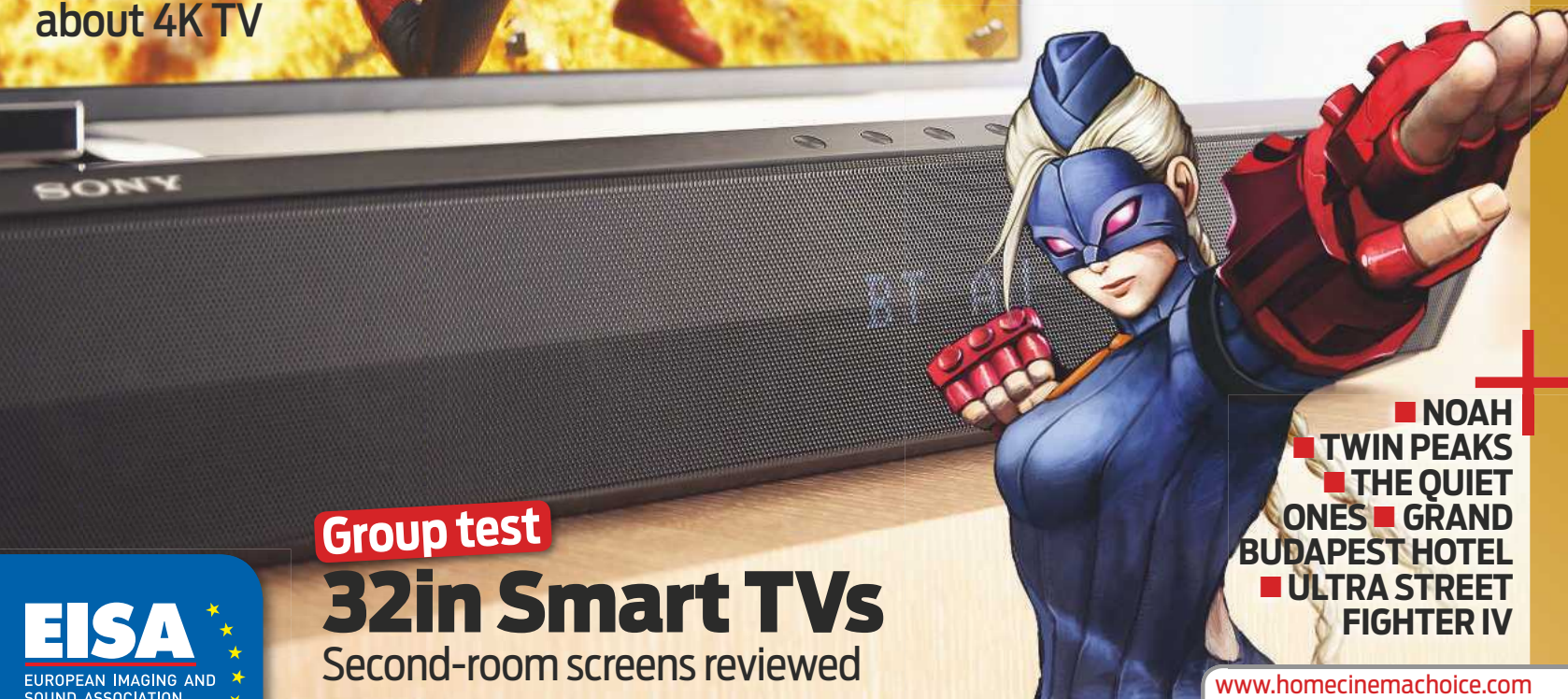
£500 Sony AVR

JVC DLA-X700 projector

Panasonic 47in Smart TV

Toshiba Blu-ray player

Monitor Audio A100 amp



Group test

32in Smart TVs

Second-room screens reviewed

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■ TWIN PEAKS
■ THE QUIET ONES
■ GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL
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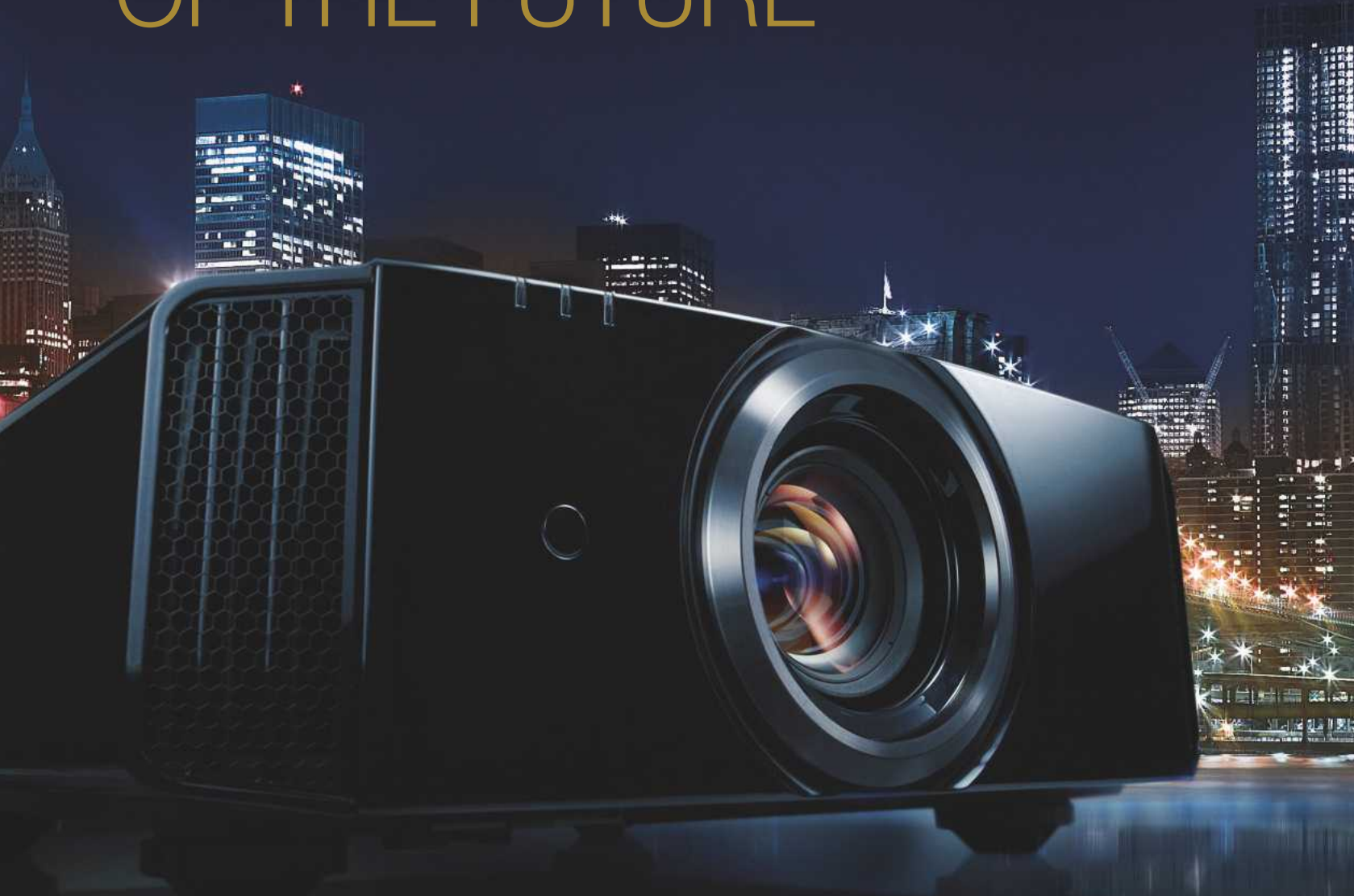
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Or for more information visit: www.jvc.co.uk

DLA-X500R has been awarded:



DLA-X700R has been awarded:



* The 2014 range of JVC D-ILA Projectors consists of model numbers DLA-X900R, DLA-X700R, DLA-X500R. Visit www.jvc.co.uk for more details. ** Contrast ratio specifications are for the DLA-X900R.

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From outside the UK: +44 (0) 1689 869 840

Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd

TEST WALL IMAGES:

©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/CUI QUNYING
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Home Cinema Choice, ISSN 1359-6276, is published monthly with an additional issue in May by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIME MEDIA Ltd, Enterprise House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, UK. The US annual subscription price is £50GBP (equivalent to approximately 108USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 195-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11434, USA. Postmaster: Send address changes to Home Cinema Choice, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 195-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at CDS GLOBAL Ltd, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.



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WELCOME

'Blu-ray's gone hasn't it?' said the person on the train next to me, in the middle of a conversation with her friend that spanned curved TV, 4K and the merits of different brands. So has Blu-ray 'gone'? Of course it hasn't. But it's intriguing that some people might think it.



Blu-ray's problem is simply that it isn't new. Stories that get covered in both the mainstream and tech press naturally focus on new innovations, which these days means the likes of Smart watches, curved screens and video streaming services. **Often, the only time Blu-ray gets a mention is in regard to a newer tech that's going to 'kill it'.** Yet the latest stats

from the British Video Association show Blu-ray disc sales growing and 73 per cent of Britain's £2.24 billion video market still coming via physical, rather than digital, formats. And with Dolby Atmos and potentially 4K coming to Blu-ray, it seems pretty healthy to me...

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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Adrian Justins:
Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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L'Assassino
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BULLETIN

→ **News Highlights** PHILIPS Android-powered Ultra HD TV hits Europe **AMAZON INSTANT VIDEO** Sci-fi series *Extant* marks new strategy for VOD platform **SKY & FREESAT** Growth figures show UK love affair with satellite TV **PARADIGM** New duo of soundbars unleashed **NEWS X10** Hot stories in bite-size chunks **24: LIVE ANOTHER DAY** Jack Bauer's back on Blu-ray **AND MUCH MORE!**

Retro Ruark

Ruark Audio R7 AV Mount → www.ruarkaudio.com



Ruark Audio dazzled hi-fi fans last year with its £2,000 radiogram-inspired R7 music centre, which mixes CD, DAB, Bluetooth and DLNA support with a 2.1 driver array. Now, with the arrival of the £300 R7 AV Mount, film freaks can also get excited. The precision-engineered mount is designed to accommodate flatscreens (which can be routed to the R7 via its optical audio input) up to 50in. It also features a cantilevered swivel head for optimum positioning and an adjustable glass shelf to hold your Blu-ray player or set-top box.

HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

4K flagship

Philips 65PUS9809 → www.tpvision.com



Philips has unveiled a new flagship model in its range of 4K TVs. The 65PUS9809 is due to hit Europe in the next couple of months (with a UK date still TBC) and boasts Android-powered Smart TV – it has been certified by Google and provides access to the Google Play Store

in addition to Philips' own content platform. The 65in 4K screen should be no slouch in the picture department either, utilising Bright Pro and Micro Dimming Premium technology to optimise contrast. Other features include four-sided Ambilight and a separate wireless subwoofer.

Wireless Wharfedales



UK brand Wharfedale has launched a Bluetooth-capable active stereo speaker pair as it seeks to claim

a slice of the desktop audio market. The new DS-1s, which sport a similar styling to the brand's DX-1 home cinema speakers, incorporate a 4in bass driver and 1in tweeter joined by a 'high-performance DSP-based digital amp.' NFC pairing is offered, Bluetooth transmission is claimed up to 10m, and a 3.5mm input allows external device hookup. They're on sale now, priced at £150.

www.wharfedale.co.uk

Magico-so-expensive



Clearly targeted at those with deep pockets, Magico's new 10th

anniversary M Project speakers are built to order, limited to only 50 pairs and start in price at £130,000-per-pair for a standard finish. Three-way models with a quintet of drivers (three 10in bass drivers, a 6in mid and a 1in diamond-coated beryllium tweeter), each curvy floorstander claims a frequency response of 20Hz to 50kHz and weighs in at a staggering 180kg.

Order now and you can expect delivery around October.

www.absolutesounds.com

YouView for less



Humax has expanded its line-up

of YouView set-top boxes with the DTR-T2000. Described as the brand's 'most compact and fastest' YouView box to date, the new £200 STB features a 500GB hard drive capable of storing up to 125 hours of HD content or 300 hours of SD. The company has also launched a new entry-level Freeview+HD PVR – the £150 HDR-1800T – which combines a 320GB HDD with network file streaming, BBC iPlayer/YouTube access and support for VuTV PayTV content.

www.humaxdigital.com/uk

Amazon's up for VOD fight

Hopes Halle Berry's sci-fi show *Extant* will rocket its service into orbit

The arrival of Halle Berry's sci-fi mystery series *Extant* exclusively on Amazon Prime Instant Video heralds a turning point in the battle between the online retailer and rival Netflix for dominance of the streaming video market. So says marketing and merchandising director Russell Morris. 'When you've got a series put together by CBS, executive produced by Steven Spielberg and featuring Halle Berry in her first TV show this millennium, you really have a signifier of where we are going,' he says. 'This show is a statement of intent.'

Extant, which opens with Berry returning from a year-long solo space jaunt, only to find herself pregnant, is the biggest exclusive acquisition yet for the streaming service. Episodes go live weekly one day after their US transmission. 'We've now got a good number of exclusive content offerings,' says Morris. '*Vikings* was our first, and we took a lot of heart from the fact that it quickly became our biggest title, despite being up against quality content like *The Walking Dead* and *Desperate Housewives*. Since then we've added other exclusives, including *Black Sails*.'

The company recently nabbed rights to the thriller *Ripper Street*.

'Getting Season 3 of that show was a moment for us,' confides Morris. 'For whatever reason, the BBC decided it wasn't going to go for a third season, despite getting between seven and eight million customers per episode. So we thought: "We'll take that!" Season 3 will now be exclusive to us.'

First-run content is increasingly seen as a key weapon in the battle for



Russell Morris: 'We're cheaper than the competition, have more content and offer a delivery service on top of all that'

SVoD (Subscription Video on Demand) supremacy. Morris says the company is also accelerating its Amazon Originals programme.

'Our studios produced five pilots earlier this year and, based on feedback from customers, we've gone ahead and commissioned four, including *Mozart in the Jungle* written by Roman Coppola. Next year we'll also have *After*, the new sci-fi show from Chris Carter of *X-Files* fame. He's writing that right now.'

Amazon says it isn't just focusing on blockbuster fare either. 'We have more kids' content than anyone else in the UK. That matters to us a lot, we care about the selection available.' Indeed, the latest launches from Amazon Originals are children's animations *Tumble Leaf* and *Creative Galaxy*. 'They've surprised us with what they've done, rising to second and third most popular in our kids selection.'

Bundled offering

While Amazon was criticised when it shuttered LoveFilm and rolled its streaming operation with the Prime delivery service, Morris maintains it was the right thing to do. 'Those two services combined at £79 a year now stand as being the cheapest streaming service in the UK. The growth in Amazon Prime has never been bigger. We're cheaper than the competition, have more content and we offer a delivery service on top of all that. Having *Extant* marks another threshold.'



Halle Berry gets an earful in *Extant*

PLAYLIST...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

The LEGO Movie 3D (All-region BD)

It may be aimed at kids, but it's older viewers who will really get the most out of this terrific CG 'toon thanks to its knowing gags and reference-quality AV prowess



The Raid 2 (Region B BD)



The dynamic DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix ensures that you feel every punch and kick in Gareth Edwards' awesome martial arts sequel

Watch Dogs (360/Xbox One/PS3/PS4/ PC)



We're currently savouring the thrill that comes from 'hacking' the world around us in this oh-so-enjoyable free-roaming videogame.

The Last Horror Film (R2 DVD)



Indie label 88 Films continues to delight genre fans with a feature-packed DVD of this witty and wacky slasher

Masters of Sex: Season 1 (R2 DVD)



Not even the lack of a UK Blu-ray release can stop us from being seduced by this smart TV series.

EXTRAS...

Small items that could make a big impression

Displates



Demonstrate your movie fan credentials without sacrificing the aesthetics of your living room with this range of metal posters featuring designs by more than 1,000 artists from around the world. For the full slate head to www.displate.com

True Blood POP Figurines



Treat yourself to a tiny version of *True Blood* favourites Sookie, Bill, Eric, Pam, Alcide and Lafayette with this range of 3.75in vinyl figures released to coincide with the final season.

Dredd: Illustrated Script



A must-own for any fan of the flick, this fantastic book is now available in paperback and features the script running in parallel with *2000A.D.* artist Jock's comic book adaptation and concept art.

Power Tap USB Charger



A quirky plug for those constantly needing to charge their Smart device, the Power Tap works by twisting the handle, with its LED changing colour from red (standby) to blue (charging). £15 from Firebox.com

Sky and Freesat in high spirits

UK satcasters report growing subscriber numbers over the last year

The latest quarterly reports from both Sky and Freesat show the UK remains enthralled with the satellite services, and eager to take up the latest innovations offered by the two companies.

Pay TV stalwart Sky in particular is riding high on impressive growth: in the 12-month period that ended on June 30, it added 264,000 new TV customers, double the previous figure. It also doubled revenues from its Sky Store (helped by the Buy and Keep service which includes a DVD copy of a movie) and saw a 19 per cent increase in subscribers to the Sky Go mobile platform.

Chief Executive Jeremy Darroch believes the quality of its programming is paying dividends. 'We saw a particularly good performance in TV. This growth was underpinned by the increasing quality and range of content that we offer for the whole family, making Sky the number one destination for customers who want the best choice of TV.'

And away from its linear heritage Sky is finding success via its on-demand services. Following a push to get consumers to take their



Jeremy Darroch: Sky's Chief Executive says a drive to increase quality programming is helping to lure new subscribers

hardware online, the company says over half of its subscribers have access to its VOD portfolio, including the heavily advertised Box Sets library. And the Now TV box, which enables subscription viewing of premium Sky content without a dish or STB, is also ringing the cash register. Although the £10 streamer can be used solely to view free channels, Sky says 20 per cent of Now TV customers are purchasing both the Entertainment and Movies monthly passes.

The Freetime good times

Freesat's take up is somewhat more muted, with the subscription-free company claiming it has added

24,000 new households in the first half of 2014, taking its total to 1.85m. Yet its Freetime service is gaining fans – Freetime set-top boxes now account for 47 per cent of all Freesat STBs sold. The 18-month old Smart VOD platform provides catchup-channels for BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and 5 on Demand via a roll-back EPG – and this year has also been integrated into some Panasonic TVs. Freesat's EPG/PVR app is also now available on Android as well as iOS.



Sky (left) and Freesat (above): gaining subscribers

Paradigm shifts the audio bar

High-end Canadian soundbars promise 'bigscreen sound in your front room'

Anthem AV Solutions has expanded its audio lineup with the arrival of two high-end soundbars from Canadian loudspeaker specialist Paradigm.

The £1,300 Paradigm Soundscape employs a quartet of 4.5in mid/bass woofers – claiming enhanced sound reproduction in the higher midrange – alongside a trio of ferro-fluid-cooled 1in aluminium tweeters. All the drivers are physically separated within the cabinet, with incoming signals fettled by proprietary DSP and switchable EQ allowing for table-top or wall-mounted placement. A built-in transmitter and wireless receiver are included should you want to add an external

subwoofer, alongside optical, coaxial and analogue stereo inputs.

The £800 Paradigm Soundtrack 2 utilises a combination of two 4in mid/bass woofers, twin 4in passive radiators and two 1in tweeters. This 2.1-channel system also ships with a wireless low-profile woofer featuring an 8in driver and 100W amplification.

Both soundbars incorporate Paradigm's bespoke Virtual Surround technology and Bluetooth apt-X music streaming. www.anthemavs.co.uk





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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ AUGUST



22: Sin City: A Dame to Kill For

This latest slice of battered and bloody comic book noir features four more stories by *Sin City* creator Frank Miller. Get a piece of the action at a cinema near you from today.
www.lionsgatefilms.co.uk

25: Transcendence

Cinematographer and frequent Christopher Nolan collaborator Wally Pfister made the leap to directing with this sci-fi flick. Hopefully it will fare better on DVD and Blu-ray than it did at UK cinemas earlier this year.
www.entertainmentfilms.com

→ SEPTEMBER

01: Ghostbusters 1 & 2

This spook-tacular Blu-ray double-pack boasts a 4K remaster of the original alongside the hi-def debut of its underrated sequel.
www.sonypictures.co.uk

05: IFA 2014

The Messe Berlin throws open its doors today and welcomes visitors to Europe's biggest technology expo. Expect plenty of new-look home cinema hardware.
www.ifa-berlin.com/en

08: The Sopranos: The Complete Series

Celebrate the 15th anniversary of HBO's groundbreaking crime drama with this new 28-disc boxset, which brings all six seasons of the show to Blu-ray for the first time.
www.hbouk.co.uk

12: Wolfcop



Is there more to this flick about a cop cursed to turn into a werewolf than a fabulous title? Find out when this low-budget Canadian horror-comedy hits selected UK cinemas.
www.studiocanal.co.uk

15: Pompeii 3D

Paul W.S. Anderson (*Resident Evil*) takes a break from zombies for this sword-n-sandals epic set in the shadow of that volcanic eruption. Available on DVD, BD and 3D BD.
www.entertainmentone.co.uk

18: HCC #239

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews.
www.homecinemachoice.com

Guess what? 4K footie rocks!

4K film of the 2014 FIFA World Cup due in cinemas in December

The World Cup is a fading memory, and it was fun while it lasted – aside from the whole England thing. What's more, for a few games at least it wasn't just fun in an HD kind of way. Three full matches were filmed by Sony in native 4K, using a small team of the brand's F-55 4K cameras, while nine matches were filmed by Japanese broadcaster NHK in 8K (down-converted highlights of which will be used in *The Official 4K Film of the 2014 FIFA World Cup*, due in cinemas this December).

Two of the Sony-shot 4K matches – the final between Germany and Argentina and the France v Germany quarter final – were even put on public display at screenings at Vue Cinemas in London (right), streamed live via satellite in conjunction with Eutelsat.

HCC wasn't prepared to leave it there, though. Determined to see how 4K World Cup footage matched up against the HD feeds, we badgered Sony into giving us a server stuffed with clips of 4K World Cup footie action – some of its own native 4K material, and some of NHK's down-converted 8K footage. All the clips were presented in 3,840 x 2,160 resolution at a sports-friendly 60p frame rate. And it all played back beautifully on a reference-grade 65in Sony 4K TV.

In fact, toggling between our HD recording of the final (recorded from the BBC via a Sky receiver) and the 4K clips was simply revelatory – like going from watching a manufactured screen of pixels to looking at reality through a window. Albeit a window with a black bezel and forward-facing speakers.

So exactly what elements create this irresistible 'being there' sensation? The first thing is the extra



Watching Sony's 4K World Cup footage was the next-best thing to being in Rio



detail. We could clearly see incredibly fine details, such as the weave in the player's shirts, the beads of perspiration on their faces, every divot in the pitch, every detail of every agonised play-acting expression and, yes, every inglorious daub of every flaming player tattoo. All to an extent not visible with HD. In fact, HD felt positively soft – and thus less immersive – by comparison.

Thanks to the 60p presentation, none of this detail seems to get lost between frames. The full 4K effect is felt no matter how frenetic the action. Colour finesse is also striking. Subtle shadings in the players shirts – especially when they'd got a bit sweaty – were noticeable that were absent from the HD presentation. It's worth adding that we couldn't see much difference between the native 4K and down-converted 8K feeds, except that the native material looked a touch crisper with fast motion.

4K sport at 60p? Count us in.

Marantz adds Atmos



Marantz is the latest manufacturer to offer support for next-gen cinema

surround format Dolby Atmos. The AVR brand's upcoming nine-channel SR7009 (pictured) will set you back around £1,400 and can handle up to 11.2 channels of sound, with support for Audyssey DSX, DTS Neo:X 11.1 and Dolby Atmos. It also boasts eight HDMI inputs with 4K/60Hz passthrough. For those unconcerned with the latest audio codecs, Marantz also has a new £900 seven-channel model on the way, dubbed the SR6009.
www.marantz.co.uk

Remaking the Grado



UK distributor Armour Home has added New York-based audio specialist Grado's third-generation of

headphones to its portfolio. In designing the e Series Grado claims to have revisited and upgraded every single component used in the creation of its headphones – right down to the glue, which has been 'optimised for greater strength... and less mass'. The e Series consists of ten models, with prices starting at £80 for the SR-60e and going up to £1,700 for the range-topping PS-1000e.
www.armourhome.co.uk

Entry-level Reference



American loudspeaker manufacturer Klipsch has introduced eight models in its new 'first tier' Reference Series.

The initial entry-level range consists of two floorstanders, two monitors, a centre, a surround speaker and two subwoofers – all boasting Tractrix Horn technology and Linear Travel Suspension aluminium tweeters. Prices run from \$200 (£120) for a pair of R-15M monitors up to \$900 (£535) for a pair of R-26F floorstanders. Expect news of a UK release following this year's IFA tech expo in September.
www.klipsch.co.uk

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Next-gen consoles add Now TV
Both Sony's PlayStation 4 and Microsoft's Xbox One consoles have added Sky's much-lauded Now TV streaming service to their line-up of entertainment channels. Now TV allows users to stream live sporting events, movies and other premium content by buying monthly passes, removing the need for a yearly contract and satellite installation. And both console manufacturers also plan to add 3D Blu-ray playback to their next-gen systems via firmware upgrades any day now. Yippee!

2 Golden ears
Think your ears are on a par with those of any professional audio engineer? Well now you can put your auditory skills to the test with Philips' Golden Ears Challenge. This online test is spread across four levels (Basic, Bronze, Silver and Gold) and contains the 'essential elements' of the brand's professional training program. Visit www.goldenears/philips.com and see how far you can go.

3 In-car ripping causes trouble
Ford and General Motors are being taken to court by the Alliance of Artists and Recording Companies (AARC) non-profit group in the US after it emerged that neither has paid royalties for installing CD players capable of ripping music to an internal hard drive in some of their vehicles. Oops.

4 BSkyB goes pan-European
BSkyB has agreed to acquire 21st Century Fox's 57.4 per cent stake in Sky Italia and 100 per cent stake in Sky Deutschland in a deal said to be worth up to £7billion.

5 Browser streaming suffers
Movie and TV streaming service Wuaki.tv believes that the days of streaming content via web browsers are coming to an end, having witnessed a 'huge increase' in titles being streamed to Smart TVs and other connected devices over the past six months. Based on current figures it predicts that less than one per cent of all streaming viewing will take place through laptop and PC browsers in the next 12-24 months.

6 Loewe to ramp up TV output?
Things have been pretty quiet regarding Loewe since the German high-end AV specialist announced a strategic partnership with China's Hisense Electric Co. last Summer. However that may be about to change, with rumours indicating that Loewe will unveil a new range of curved 4K/UHD TVs at this year's IFA AV expo. The company is also expected to be far more competitive with its pricing in the future.

7 Beats versus Bose
Headphone-maker Beats is being sued by rival manufacturer Bose over alleged infringements of noise-cancelling patents. The case aims to prevent Beats from selling its noise-cancelling Studio range of cans in the US. At the time of going to press neither Beats nor its new owner Apple had responded to the allegations.

8 Huge losses at Nintendo
Shares in Japanese gaming legend Nintendo tumbled after the company announced a loss of ¥9.9billion (£57million) for the months of April-to-June. This comes in stark contrast to the same period last year, which saw the company post profits in the region of ¥8.6billion (£50million).

9 Samsung gets 4K bends
Having first demonstrated the concept at the CES expo in January, Samsung recently released its first bendable 4K TV. The UN78S9B went on sale in Korea on August 1 and can transform from a 78in flatscreen to a curved screen at the touch of a button.

10 Holy Blu-ray Bat-box!
Following months of rumours, Warner Home Entertainment has confirmed that the classic '60s *Batman* TV series is coming to Blu-ray in November. The 13-disc limited edition boxset is an exclusive to Amazon in the UK, but promises plenty of thrills for Bat-fans in the form of remastered versions of all 120 episodes, a Hot Wheels replica Batmobile, 44 vintage trading cards, a collectible book and copious exclusive disc-based extras (including a roundtable chat and look at the most sought-after Batman collectibles).



PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Monsters rebooted

Writers Alex Kurtzman and Chris Morgan have been hired to reboot Universal's classic monster franchises into a shared universe. The first instalment – a reboot of *The Mummy* – is set for 2016.

Back from the Rim



Guillermo del Toro has revealed that development has already started on a sequel to his 'giant robots versus giant monsters' mash-up *Pacific Rim*. The film is currently on target to hit cinemas in April 2017, and it will be joined on TV by an animated spin-off.

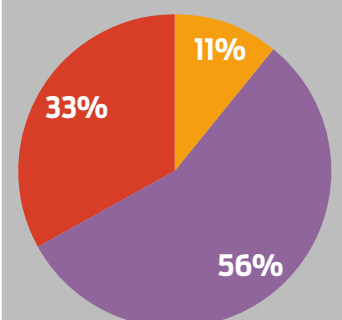
Community service

Yahoo has rescued geek-friendly sitcom *Community*, commissioning a new 13-episode sixth season for its Yahoo Screen ad-based video service. US network NBC cancelled the show back in May and Yahoo's decision to pick up the show came just in the nick of time, with only a week left before the principal cast's contracts were due to expire.

WE ASKED...

Are you planning on upgrading your system to Dolby Atmos?

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☐ No
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London calling

24: Live Another Day → 20th Century Fox → Region B BD/R2 DVD



Following a four-year hiatus, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) blasts his way back on to our screens with *24: Live Another Day*, shaking up the real-time show's formula (only 12 episodes instead of the usual 24) and relocating the action to London, with Jack aiding an investigation into a threat against the visiting US President. If you missed the series when it aired on Sky 1 HD this Summer, you can start counting down the minutes until it arrives on Blu-ray and DVD on October 6, where you can also catch an exclusive new story extension entitled *24: Solitary*.



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Ultra Hi-Def: how futureproof is futureproof?

Evolving 4K/Ultra HD standards, HDCP 2.2 copy protection and UHD-1 Phase 1 specifications – what does it all mean? **Steve May** explains

Television is evolving. Broadcasters, manufacturers and content creators have begun (in some cases begrudgingly) to adopt Ultra HD over Full HD 2K, and it's no easy task. Those sleek 4K flat- (and curved) screens you may be shortlisting are just the tip of an iceberg of tumultuous change. Behind the scenes, new camera technologies are being developed, workflow tools adopted and technical standards fine-tuned.

Signposting significant progress on the broadcast side, the DVB Steering committee recently approved the UHD-1 Phase 1 specification. This set of parameters, originally proposed in 2013, sets out to address a basic 4K broadcast standard as governed by the decoding abilities (or memory bandwidth) of first-generation HEVC (High Efficiency Video Coding) decoder chips. But what does it all mean if you're going to buy a 4K/UHD TV now?

Read on as we answer all the questions you have about UHD, plus a few you don't...

So, UHD-1 Phase 1 – what's all that about?

UHD-1 Phase 1 is an internationally agreed standard enshrining 3,840 x 2,160 resolution at frame rates up to 60fps, along with 10-bit colour depth (all current broadcasting and content is

8-bit) albeit with conventional Rec 709 colorimetry, and a standardised HEVC profile for decoding. The standard basically covers off the commercial requirements that would constitute a UHD TV service, expected to begin in earnest in 2015/2016, and is in line with the decoding capabilities of those all-important first-gen HEVC decoders.

Great! So we could have BBC One 4K pretty quick then, eh?

Don't expect Freeview to suddenly juggle its multiplexes to create UHD services, because that's not going to happen any time soon. The UHD-1 Phase 1 spec is looking more relevant to streaming IPTV and satellite services.

If this is UHD-1 Phase 1, when are we likely to see a Phase 2?

The Ultra HD specification is a movable feast. UHD-1 Phase 2 is likely to be ratified around 2017, when more capable HEVC decoder ICs become available. It will take the specification further and outline support for enhanced services. Phase 2 includes much of the really interesting stuff, including high frame rate (up to 100/120/150fps) broadcasts; an expansion of the colour space available to content creators and displays; a higher

dynamic range (HDR), and advanced audio technologies (it'll be Dolby Atmos, you heard it here first). And yes, before you ask, this in turn will lead to UHD-2, which will formally embrace 8K resolution – that's 7,680 x 4,320. Unsurprisingly, to get all this extra goodness we're going to need considerably fatter HDMI cables, as data rates will increase by at least 20 per cent, according to EBU (European Broadcasting Union) estimates.

Oh, okay. But when channels are launched, my 4K TV will work with them, right? It has an HEVC decoder inside...

Not exactly. Having an HEVC decoder onboard is a part of the puzzle – after all, your TV needs one to qualify for the Netflix 4K service (which offers *House of Cards* in UHD, pictured left), but it's no guarantee of future compatibility. Panasonic's AX802 UHD TVs have an HEVC decoder but do not even work with the Netflix 2,160p streams. And while experimental over-the-air transmissions are being carried out, notably in Korea and Japan, it's likely any early 4K broadcast service will come from a Pay TV operator which will supply its own HEVC-decoding equipment.

Fine. I'll buy a new set-top box. And then everything's sorted, right?

Possibly. It depends on whether your subscription service is locked down with HDCP 2.2 copy protection and just how it'll work with hardware which is not HDCP 2.2-compatible. Steven Pyne, director of sales for HEVC-chip and decoder maker VIXS, told *HCC* that an HDCP 2.2 receiver could still work with non-compliant hardware, but that the image might be degraded in same way. The catch is there's hardly any HDCP 2.2-ready equipment available. If you currently route sources through an AVR, Onkyo is the only maker with a range offering HDCP 2.2 support.

So why haven't other AV receiver makers followed Onkyo's lead?

The only HDCP 2.2 chipset available to equipment manufacturers is made by Silicon Image. However, this doesn't support full-fat 4K 4:4:4 colour sampling; instead it's a 4:2:0 solution. Both Yamaha and Denon told *HCC* they would prefer to wait for 4:4:4 silicon to become available – even though this format may never be used for content distribution.

Really? So what's the point of 4:4:4 colour?

As colour bit depth increases to 10-bit, or even 12-bit, colour sampling similarly will improve. EBU recommendations call for content production at either 4:2:2 and 4:4:4, but with distribution at 4:2:0. This applies equally for 8K material as it does 4K. 4:2:0 is therefore likely to become the *de facto* broadcasting colour sampling standard used by consumer equipment.

But will 4:4:4 colour sampling be part of a new Blu-ray standard?

Technically it could, but the BDA (Blu-ray Disc

Association) is currently playing its next-gen format cards close to its chest – and we've tried tickling it under the armpits to see if it drops any of them. It's worth pointing out that current HDMI cables can only support 4:2:0 colour sampling on 50/60p 4K content. That means Peter Jackson's *...Hobbit* trilogy, for example, will most likely only be available in high-frame rate 4K Blu-ray with 10-bit 4:2:0 colour. However, HDMI 2.0 can support 10-bit 4:4:4 colour on 4K at 24/25/30fps, likely to be the most common formats for movies on 4K Blu-ray.

So when do you think 4K Blu-rays will arrive?

We can't say with absolute certainty and don't like to guess. Put it this way – if you're asking the same question this time next year, something's gone a bit wrong at the BDA...

What about any potential Sky 4K broadcasts? When can I get them?

The only thing we can say for sure is that Sky will introduce a 4K service, along with a new HEVC-powered set-top box, at some point in the future. It's absolutely part of its business model, which is built upon offering premium services people are prepared to pay for. Of course, Sky won't say anything official until it's good and ready. However, if we were gambling men, we might suggest it'll follow a similar roll-out to that adopted for 3D.

The most obvious beneficiary of 4K broadcasting is bigscreen sports. The Premier League, captured in 2,160p resolution and 60fps would be a wondrous thing to behold. So we'd anticipate Sky first offering the service to pubs and clubs, then after a suitable window (six to eight months?) opening up its 4K channel to domestic consumers. This maximizes potential revenue streams and builds awareness. And, of course, any move by Sky would most likely kickstart rival services from Virgin Media and BT. A good guess would be a 2015/16 launch, but Sky might prefer to wait for UHD-1 Phase 2-compatible HEVC decoders to become available before jumping in. We can only speculate.

So, what your saying is, new hardware may not be futureproof, and we still don't know what the future will bring?

Absolutely. Exciting isn't it? The key thing to realize is that UHD isn't landing pre-packed and perfectly formed; it's an amorphous, mutating thing. What you buy today will almost certainly be different from what you'll be offered in five years time.

What's particularly different about this latest evolution in broadcast and consumer electronics technology is that it's being played out in real time, across the internet and through social media, where every wrinkle is subject to scrutiny and wild speculation before the iron is even warm. As a result you can expect ongoing caveats and confusion.

In fact the only absolute certainly is that if you buy a 4K/UHD TV today, it'll be better than what you had yesterday. Welcome to the future of television... ■

THE 4K NAME GAME

Is 4K the same as Ultra HD? For consumers, yes.

There's a certain amount of academic bluster about the terminology surrounding Ultra HD TV and 4K. This stems from the fact that the original 4K cinema format, as distributed to theatres on DCPs, is 4,096 x 2,160. However, all consumer UHD displays are 3,840 x 2,160 (which is actually Quad HD).

4K has been widely adopted as a marketing term by many brands to describe Quad HD resolution; purists may not like the fact, but the two terms have become effectively interchangeable. Studios and moviemakers, mastering 4,096 x 2,160 content to domestic 3,840 x 2,160, aren't concerned about the pixel difference, and neither should you be.



The digital cinema PJ at your multiplex employs a 4,096 x 2,160 resolution

The best of the best!

From smallscale movie dens to luxury screening rooms and integrated homes, the CEDIA Awards showcase the cream of the custom installation crop. **Mark Craven** reports



WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING for inspiration for our own home cinemas, and every year the CEDIA Awards give us a real thrill. Highlighting the very best custom installations from the UK, Europe and beyond, and covering everything from affordable media rooms and dedicated cinemas to smart lighting systems and ocean-borne AV, they showcase exactly what can be achieved.

As usual, the entries for 2014 were divided into categories depending on their price range and type

– with some categories, such as Best Lighting Scheme and Best Innovative Product, introduced for the first time. These were then documented and judged by a panel including HCC's pro-AV fanatic Steve May.

Over the following pages we've highlighted the winners, and those scooping 'Highly Commended' awards, in our favourite categories – plus some of the finalists that may have just missed out on a gong, but are still highly impressive. Read on!

A slender Samsung TV and on-wall Artcoustic speakers blend in to this converted period dining room



Best Media Room Over £15,000

Winner: **Philharmonic Audio Visual**

Grabbing first place in the premium media room category – think of a home cinema that doubles as a regular living space – is this luxurious-looking setup from Kent's Philharmonic Audio Visual. The room features a wall-mounted 65in 8000 Series Samsung TV, perfectly aligned with the front trio of Artcoustic speakers, including a bespoke centre enclosure designed to match the width of the flatscreen. Surround-channel audio is delivered by Artcoustic on-wall Modular SL cabinets, and bass comes via a discreet, corner-mounted Panel Sub SL Duo. An Arcam AVR600 drives the system, taking video from a Sky+HD box and Panasonic Blu-ray player – all are squirrelled away in the AV cabinet, with the Anthem's cool-running nature ideal for a space with limited airflow. An astonishingly sleek and stylish setup in what was previously a dining room in this Victorian property.

www.philharmonicav.com



Best Media Room Under £15,000

Winner: **Cornflake**

Three of the walls here are mainly made of glass, but the owner still wanted some high-class AV. The solution was to fit a Samsung HD screen – and Leon Custom LCR soundbar – on a pivoting mount, and install B&W in-ceiling speakers. Lutron-controlled blinds and lighting take care of unwanted glare.

www.cornflake.co.uk



22 THE BEST OF THE BEST

Best Media Room Under £15,000

Finalist: **BrownHen Solutions**

Has your house got an 'underground vault'? Then this is what you can do with it. Somerset's BrownHen Solutions were called upon to craft a media room that linked up with an existing multiroom audio system and gave the family somewhere to kick back with a Blu-ray uninterrupted. Custom-made furniture neatly houses all system hardware and the disc collection – much of the AV already belonged to the owner, but the project included installation of the in-wall SpeakerCraft enclosures.

www.brownhensolutions.com



Best Home Cinema Under £40,000

Finalist: **Life Emotions**

A complete makeover by Portuguese AV specialist Lift Emotions, this cosy setup features five-channel sonics courtesy of in-wall and in-ceiling speakers, beefed up by twin subwoofers. A mounted projector fires hi-def visuals at the projector screen; below the latter sits an AV cabinet keeping all the source components neat and tidy. A unique ambient touch is the inclusion of four chandeliers complete with a dimming feature – preset lighting scenes are selected via a keypad controller.

www.life-emotions.pt



Up to 18 guests can relax below the star ceiling on individual recliners



Best Home Cinema Over £100,000**Winner: Smartcomm**

Wowser! This mega home cinema (with 4m projector screen) is undoubtedly the pride and joy of a film fan who demanded an 'out-of-this-world experience', with Buckinghamshire install outfit Smartcomm stepping up to the challenge. It features seating for an audience of 18 and high-quality hardware from the likes of Datasat, Kaleidescape, Pro Audio and Digital Projection. And it's designed to be a doddle to use, with a touchpanel-controlled Crestron system keeping everything running smoothly. www.smartcomm.co.uk





Best Media Room Under £15,000

Finalist: **Grahams Hi-Fi**

The basement of an Austrian ski chalet was the venue for North London's Grahams Hi-Fi when it set about creating this clever media wall. Part of a fully-fledged smart home, it's an area regularly frequented by guests, which perhaps explains why all of the control and source electronics are completely hidden in a bespoke unit, as well as the speakers and subwoofer, to avoid any *après-ski* mishaps. The Panasonic plasma is pretty much the only thing on show.

www.grahams.co.uk



Best Media Room Over £15,000

Highly Commended: **Bespoke Home Cinemas**

We love the simple styling of this spacious movie den, designed by Leeds' Bespoke Home Cinemas as the house was being built – useful as it meant that air-conditioning could be easily incorporated. The ceiling 'halo' offers glamorous mood lighting, but is also used to house the projector and surround speakers. Rako switches fire up the whole setup, and sensors shut everything down if the room is left unattended. Generous seating lets the whole family enjoy the show.

www.bespokehomecinemas.co.uk



Best Home Cinema Under £40,000

Winner: **ET Home Cinema**

This snug category-winning cinema partners affordable AV hardware with a brilliant aesthetic and clever room design. Curved wall panels and rear bulkhead make the space feel wider than it is, and the latter is used to house the JVC DLA-X35 PJ and Monitor Audio FX in-ceiling speakers. Front speakers are in-wall models from MA's Gold range, while an Onkyo TX-NR818 and Panasonic BD deck are among the items in a rear kit rack. ethomecinema.co.uk

Best Dressed Rack

Winner: **SONA Projects**



This is the kind of rack system required for a large (16,000 square-foot) new-build home featuring extensive multiroom AV. Housed in a second-floor comms room, it needed to look good as well as function faultlessly. And as it's designed with separate cable termination and kit racks, it can be easily re-installed in another property should the owner decide to move...

www.sona-projects.com

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SILVER SERIES



Best Home Cinema £40,000-£100,000

Finalist: Art Install

This Russian theatre is designed for use by just three people – hence the single triple-seat sofa. As well as a minimalist design, the owner demanded ultimate ease of use from just one remote, so an iPad is programmed to operate everything from the deft lighting to the JVC DLA-X55 projector. Hardware is on show in Middle Atlantic racks below the projector screen. Audio comes from a high-end JBL Synthesis array. www.artinstall.ru

Best Media Room Over £15,000

Finalist: Bespoke Home Cinemas

Comfort is the word that springs to mind here, with twin rows of cushion-strewn seating ideal for serious movie marathons. These all face a 3m-wide 16:9 ratio projector screen with acoustically transparent material, hiding front soundstage speakers built into a stud wall. The system was fitted without any building work, with cables pulled through the voids via high-powered magnets. Clever. www.bespokehomecinemas.co.uk

Best Home Cinema £40,000-£100,000

Finalist: BNC Technology

A room that's used for gaming and music as well as movies, with nothing but the ceiling-mounted projector and screen visible. Everything else is mounted behind acoustically transparent 'walls' at the front, sides and rear, behind which sit a THX-certified Jamo D600 speaker setup, plus cabling and sonic treatments. An anamorphic lens gets the best from the 2.35:1 ratio screen. www.bnc technology.co.za



Best Yacht Installation

Winner: **Sensory International**

Ahoy there! Just because you've taken to the open seas, it doesn't mean you have to forgo the finer things in life – such as a games room with dual wall-mounted HD displays (with independent audio and video), outdoor cinema requiring a waterproof and air-conditioned enclosure for the ProjectionDesign projector, or an iPad/iPod-enabled 'Steward Call' button. Described by one CEDIA judge as being 'the most impressive yacht installation I have ever seen,' the project includes everything from lighting and AV distribution to security and global communication.

www.sensoryinternational.com



Best Lighting Scheme Over £25,000

Winner: **Andrew Lucas Limited**

This gigantic space – part of a complete smart home project – is dripping with lighting technology, all managed by a Lutron HomeWorks QS system. While the large illuminated 'jewel boxes' catch the eye (and they can change colour to suit the mood) we love the spot-lit cubby holes that surround the media wall. Maybe we should try something similar with our Blu-ray collection...

www.andrew-lucas.com



Best Home Cinema £40,000-£100,000

Winner: **Finite Solutions**

The family that uses this chic cinema room demanded best-in-class visuals – hence the 3.3m electric drop-down screen (allowing a rack and speakers to be fitted in the screen wall) and flagship JVC X95 projector. This high-end front-end rubs shoulders with a PS4 and Sky+ HD among other sources. Seven Fortress seats on two tiers ensure feet-up relaxation. www.finitesolutions.co.uk



Best Showroom

Winner: **Cornflake**

We've previously reported on Cornflake's innovative demo facilities in the heart of London, and the company has now bagged a CEDIA gong for its stunning six-room 'experience centre.' The idea here is that customers can relax and get a real feel of what a modern, tricked-out home can be like to live in, from its 12-seat cinema room and automated kitchen to hi-fi/gaming spaces. Visits are by appointment only – if you're lucky enough to get one, take your credit card... www.cornflake.co.uk

WELL DONE!

CEDIA 2014: The Winners and Highly Commended

Best Media Room Under £15,000

Winner: Cornflake

Best Media Room Over £15,000

Winner: Philharmonic Audio Visual
Highly Commended: Bespoke Home Cinemas

Best Home Cinema Under £40,000

Winner: ET Home Cinema

Best Home Cinema £40,000-£100,000

Winner: Finite Solutions

Best Home Cinema Over £100,000

Winner: Smartcomm
Highly Commended: T&T Automation

Best Integrated Home Under £100,000

Winner: James & Giles
Highly Commended: ISIS Integrated Systems

Best Integrated Home £100,000-£250,000

Winner: Grahams Hi-Fi
Highly Commended: Lifestyle Technologies

Best Integrated Home Over £250,000

Winner: SMC
Highly Commended: Andrew Lucas Limited

Best Lighting Scheme Over £25,000

Winner: Andrew Lucas Limited

Best Yacht Installation

Winner: Sensory International
Highly Commended: Sensory International

Best Dressed Rack

Winner: SONA Projects

Best Energy Management Solution

Winner: Face to Face Digital

Best Showroom

Winner: Cornflake, No. 41 Windmill Street

Best Innovative Product

Winner: HD Connectivity – HDanywhere Modular 4K

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Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing
home cinema on a
DIY basis may leave
the system performing
at way below its
optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Kingston-upon-Thames

INFIDELITY

9 High Street, Hampton Wick.
020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street. 01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street. 01603 627134
www.martinhifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street. 01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road. 01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

Tunbridge Wells

KENT HOME CINEMA

69 London Road, Southborough.
01892 535007
www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

Solihull

MUSIC MATTERS

93-95 Hobs Moat Road.
0121 742 0254
www.musicmatters.co.uk

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info

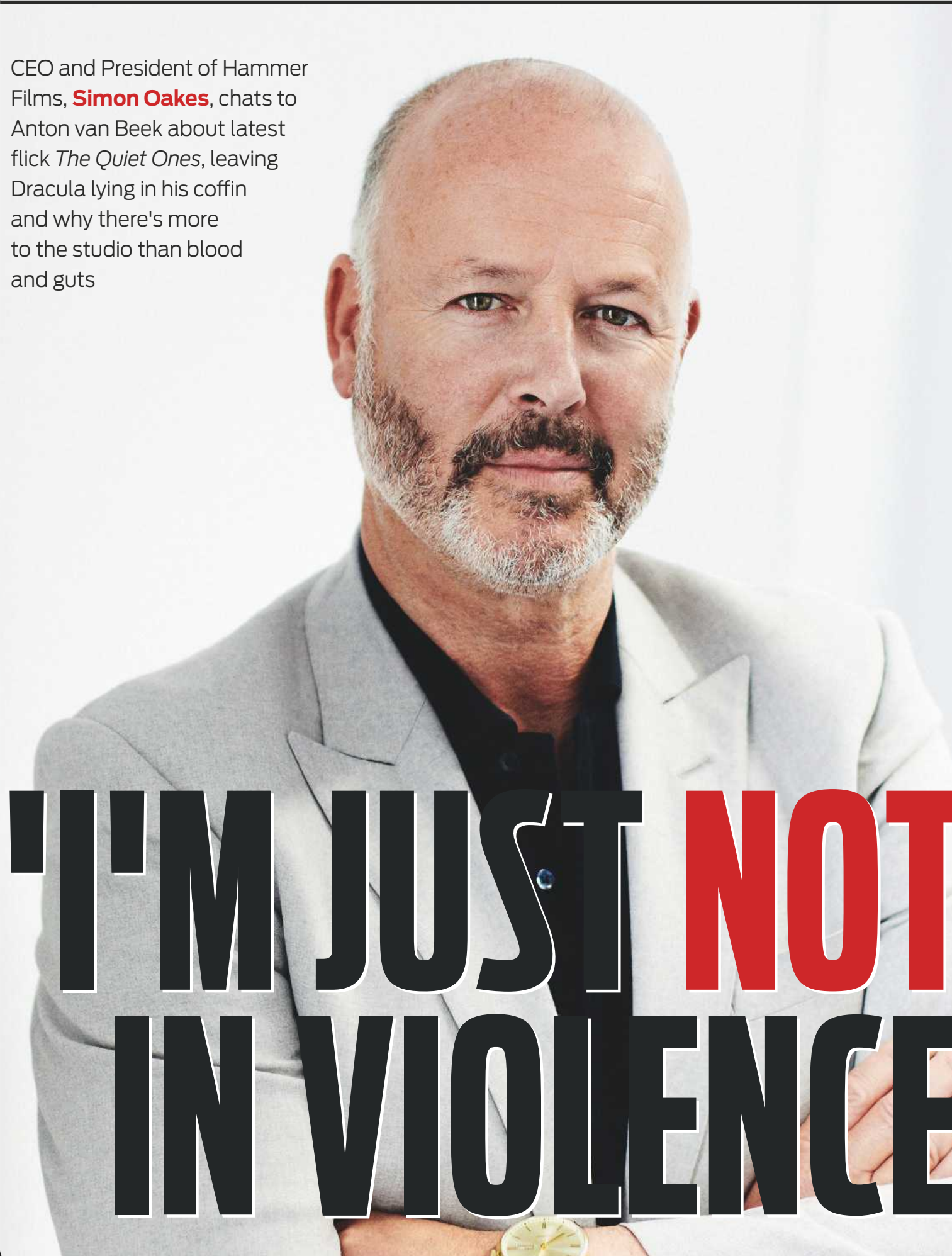


STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
SERVICE ★★★★★
FACILITIES ★★★★★
VERDICT ★★★★★

...Talk to the experts

CEO and President of Hammer Films, **Simon Oakes**, chats to Anton van Beek about latest flick *The Quiet Ones*, leaving Dracula lying in his coffin and why there's more to the studio than blood and guts

A portrait of Simon Oakes, CEO and President of Hammer Films. He is a middle-aged man with a grey beard and mustache, wearing a light grey blazer over a black shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**"I'M JUST NOT
IN VIOLENCE"**

HAMMER FILMS IS a studio reborn. The British film icon, which enjoyed worldwide success in the 1950s, '60s and '70s with a swathe of fright flicks and launched the careers of Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing among others, had seemed to be dead and buried by the mid-80s, with production ceasing completely. Yet since 2007, under the guidance of CEO Simon Oakes, Hammer is back in the limelight, chilling new audiences first with an innovative web-based horror series and then a blockbusting – and controversial – adaptation of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*. Its latest movie, *The Quiet Ones*, is out now on Blu-ray/DVD.

Let's start with *The Quiet Ones* – this has a truly astonishing performance from young English actress Olivia Cooke...

Yeah, it's a great film. It didn't perform as well as we hoped at the box office – I shouldn't say that in the middle of an interview! – but I still think it's really terrific. As for Olivia, if I say we 'lucked-out' it sounds like nothing is ever planned, but she almost walked in off the street and is now on her way to becoming a genuine star. It was her first film role and since then she's never stopped; her feet haven't touched the ground. She's so talented. The rest of the cast is great as well. I think Sam [Clafin] got *The Hunger Games* on the last day of filming, which was amazing.

You mentioned the film's box office performance. How do you weigh the importance of cinema versus home entertainment?

For me theatrical is the priority, because I think it all then leads from there. I'm a producer and financier, not a distributor, but I hope a distributor would agree with me. There were the days when you could do straight-to-video and straight-to-DVD releases and

it wouldn't matter. But I think that the plethora of product and platforms today means having theatrical visibility is critical.

That said, the film does not have to do unbelievably well at the box office; it can have a level of awareness, a level of marketing that then helps it in the secondary and third markets. Awareness is everything. If you travel as much as I do and look at the list of movies on airplanes, I'm always attracted to those that I know have been theatrically released and that for one reason or another I've not got around to seeing them.

Hammer's tradition is about the theatrical release – because in its heyday there was no such thing as DVD and I think there was one television channel! And if you look at the actors we've worked with since we started, whether it be Hilary Swank and Chloë Grace Moretz in America, or Daniel Radcliffe, Ciarán Hinds, Helen McCrory, Jared Harris and Olivia Cooke over here, you're going to attract them to a script, to a project, if they know it's going to be theatrically released.

Does Hammer's brand legacy help in attracting that sort of calibre of talent to the genre?

I think it's a double-edged sword, but it's our job to make sure that is the case. When Daniel Radcliffe said it was great to be part of the rebirth of Hammer, he was saying that on the basis of having read a script that he loved, with a part he wanted to play and a director he wanted to work with. Nobody is going to walk in and say that just because it's Hammer they'll do it. So it's key to set out the parameters of what we'll do and what we won't do, what we think our brand is about in terms of the



Since its 2007 rebirth, Hammer has been focusing on psychological horror

INTERESTED OR GORE...

types of movies we make. But I do think that there's genuinely a willingness and desire to be part of it, which is great.

Have all of the projects so far been generated in-house?

Yes, we generate everything in-house. There's one example where it wasn't and that was *Wake Wood* [2011]. But in that instance the script came to us as a very, very early first draft and we worked really heavily on its development. But with everything else we've done – *Let Me In*, *The Resident*, *The Woman in Black*, *The Quiet Ones*, the sequel to *The Woman in Black* – our whole aim is to develop everything in-house. Because the reality is that the type of scripts we get sent 'on spec' tend to be on the gory, exploitative side and we're just not interested in that.

That's interesting, because back in its heyday Hammer was frequently pushing at the boundaries of censorship.

I think it's just different. If you're talking about something like *Dracula* in 1957 it was a different world and the boundaries then were ready to be broken down. We're also talking about a cultural change in the 1960s that altered people's perceptions of what was acceptable and what wasn't.

The reality is, I'm just not interested in violence and gore. It's just not interesting to me. But that's not to say that we aren't pushing at boundaries. Psychological, unsettling storytelling is a great tradition in literature, art and cinema. I just don't think that you need to get that point over by showing blood gushing out of arms that have just been cut off. Or by how many women you can kill by the end of the first reel...

I think there's a place for violence. You know, contextually there's a place for violence, but the great horror directors didn't really need it. When you actually dissect those films very little is actually shown, instead it's suggested – and I think that's much more powerful.

It must also be a help at the box office if you can open your film up to a wider audience by getting a lower age-rating from the BBFC. Just look at the success of *The Woman in Black*...

Yeah, *The Woman in Black* was a 12A, but I doubt we'll get the same for the second one. Apparently it was the most complained about movie of 2012. To put that into context, there were five million admissions for *The Woman in Black* and there were 150 complaints. Go figure. It's sort of silly, but there's nothing we can do about it.

When you look at 12-year-olds and what they see in videogames – that's much more violent. I guess the difference is that when you've got something that is emotionally and psychologically engaging like a movie, with real people and a sense of the whole thing being 'real', then the issue around violence and stuff like that has to be very careful. There's almost a general consensus around games that there's

Olivia Cooke (below left) stars in *The Quiet Ones*



The Woman in Black earned over \$120m at the box office

a sort of distance between the player and the game itself. So I don't know where the BBFC are right now in terms of what they think is acceptable and what isn't.

Looking back at the history of the company, why do you think the appeal of Hammer has endured for so long?

That's a good question. I think it was a perfect storm in the late '50s and early '60s that seemed to mirror the breaking down of boundaries and taboos going on around the world and particularly in the UK. At the same time there was a huge influx of American movies and the UK film industry was pretty slow in terms of its output. There were some staggering directors around at that time, the 'kitchen sink' directors – and some amazing movies, but they were few and far between. Against that Hammer was making a movie every two months, so I think it was treasured by people and was somehow symbolic of that time.

I think that goes with a lot of British brands like Aston Martin, like Triumph, like Burberry; I think we have a sort of love affair with them because they may be a throwback to better times. So it's true, we've never had anything other than support from people from the beginning. Obviously, you make a movie and critics will criticise it – as they should. They'll like it or not like it or be indifferent. That's the individual movies, though. In terms of Hammer overall, I think people are really pleased that we've brought it back.

Does that sense of nostalgia play back into the films you're making, such as setting *The Quiet Ones* in the 1970s?

That's not been a policy, it's just been the way the material has gone. The whole idea behind setting *The Quiet Ones* in the '70s was as a homage to the urban myth movies that were coming out of America at the time. With *The Woman in Black*, the book was set in Edwardian times. But there's a film we'll be making towards the end of the year called *Shomer*, which I can't tell you anything about other than the name, which is a contemporary piece.

In the '70s, the studio branched out into comedy with the *On The Buses* film



What made Hammer's resurrection viable in 2007 as opposed to all of the attempts that had been made before?

I guess it was sort of a man with a plan, you know. Another group of people acquired it in the mid-'90s. They bought the catalogue and the name, the brand, but they didn't have a strategy about what they were going to do because they weren't filmmakers and they hadn't raised any production finance. They were focusing a little too much on the back catalogue. We haven't done that. We're not going to do that because that was then and this is now and the rights are very complicated, anyway, in terms of ownership. We've got like seven Dracula movies, but anybody can do a Dracula, as is well evidenced.

I had a plan about what the brand would be and how you'd revive it, and the production finance raised and ready to invest in movies – so that was the difference. We didn't go around talking about what we would do, we just started developing and making pictures. We've now made six movies since we started, and we're going to ramp up production to two-to-three pictures a year.

When Hammer returned in 2007 its first project was the web series *Beyond the Rave*. Given the proliferation of Smart TVs and streaming services since then, do you think it was ultimately ahead of its time?

I think it was. We also picked the wrong platform, because MySpace is no longer viable. But I think the idea was the right one. Where we perhaps misjudged the situation was the relationship between advertisers/sponsorship and the core demographic. *Beyond the Rave* was pretty out there in terms of sex and violence and drugs, and that was

'We can do monster movies. We can do sci-fi as well – in fact, we're bringing *Quatermass* back to television'

a pretty difficult place for sponsors to buy into. At the same time MySpace had a very unclear sense of where they wanted to be in terms of content.

However, we got a lot of PR by doing it. A lot of people who'd never heard of Hammer, and even those who had, could see that we were serious and were spending money. In a sense it was a very expensive marketing tool.

Right now we've got a Hammer YouTube channel, which we're starting to populate. But what the market's telling us is that long-form scripted programming works less well on platforms like YouTube than more factual, documentary-style programming. Netflix is different, it's really a broadcaster. Nobody thinks they're watching it on the internet, because they're streaming it onto their TV. So you get people saying 'I like to watch Netflix.' But that doesn't mean anything, it's like saying 'I like to watch ITV'. It's weird, but it's clever.

In its original incarnation Hammer worked across multiple genres with sit-com spin-offs like *On the Buses* and adventure films such as *One Million Years B.C.* Are there any plans to branch out like that again, or is the reborn Hammer focused solely on horror?

Well I don't use the word horror, hardly ever. I try to just call the company Hammer, but there's no way around it so that people won't make it synonymous with horror. I guess it depends on your view of it. Take *The Woman in Black*. Now I don't consider that to be a horror movie. I consider it to be a psychological ghost story. I think that horror has been sort of purloined by the likes of the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises, so I try not to use it very much.

I think our mantra is intense psychological storytelling. That doesn't have to be horror, it can be Hitchcockian. We can also do monster movies. We can do sci-fi as well. In fact, we're bringing *Quatermass* back to television. So I think it's quite a broad spectrum. But we're certainly not going to do the comedy stuff; that's sort of weird. I don't know how that happened, but it's never going to happen at all on my watch.

That's wonderful news about *Quatermass*. Is there anything you can tell us about the project at the moment? Will it adapt the original Nigel Kneale stories or be brand-new material?

Unfortunately I can't really say anything about it as there are too many partners involved. But it will be a completely new take, new stories, completely rebooted in a contemporary setting.

So far Hammer has resisted the lure of 3D. But are new filmmaking technologies like that of any interest?

I think you have to find the right project. Personally, I don't believe in 3D. I think the best example there has been is *Gravity*, because I don't believe it's a story-led drama. It's just an incredible technical feat by Alfonso Cuarón and by Framestore.

I don't think you need to do *The Woman in Black* in 3D. You've also got to remember that for every 3D viewer you get, there's somebody who doesn't go to the cinema because they don't want to watch it in 3D. And until there are enough 3D screens in the UK – and there aren't yet – its economic viability is still up in the air. If you get the right project, sure. If you're going to do a monster movie for example, then I think it's probably worth at least investigating the possibility of doing it in 3D. The cost might prohibit it for a while, but now it's coming down the economics make a lot more sense.

Finally, do you have any personal favourites among the classic Hammer movies?

As you can imagine there are quite a few. But I've got two real favourites. One is the first *Dracula* from 1957. The other is a film called *Scream of Fear* [aka *Taste of Fear*], one of Hammer's mini-Hitchcocks from the early '60s ■

The Quiet Ones is available to buy now on Blu-ray and DVD courtesy of Lionsgate UK and is reviewed on p97.

HAMMER TIME AGAIN

What the studio's been up to since its re-awakening

Beyond the Rave (2008)

This 20-part serial was initially published on social network MySpace and follows a group of friends attending a rave that's run by vampires. It was eventually released on DVD in 2010.

Let Me In (2010)

Director Matt Reeves moved from marshalling a city-destroying monster in *Cloverfield* to a much more intimate type of horror in this English-language remake of the acclaimed Swedish vampire flick, *Let the Right One In*.

The Resident (2011)

Hammer icon Christopher Lee cameos in this thriller about a single woman (Hilary Swank) who moves to a new apartment, only to find herself the victim of a creepy stalker.

Wake Wood (2011)

Hammer returned to the supernatural with this low-budget shocker that harks back to *Don't Look Now* and *The Wicker Man* with its taboo tale of death and resurrection.

The Woman in Black (2012)

The reborn Hammer's biggest hit to date is this lavish adaptation of Susan Hill's celebrated novel, written for the screen by Jane (Kick-Ass) Goldman and starring Daniel (Harry Potter) Radcliffe.

The Quiet Ones (2014)

A college professor sets out to prove that there is no such thing as the supernatural by experimenting on a disturbed young woman. What could possibly go wrong?

The Woman in Black: Angel of Death (2015)

Due to open on February 13, 2015, this eagerly-awaited sequel is set to take place during World War II when a group of school children are evacuated to Eel Marsh House during the Blitz.

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September 2014

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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** JOHN LEWIS 55in Full HD TV packed with LG tech
 DALI Slim-line on-wall 5.1 speaker array PANASONIC Mid-range 47in LED TV SAMSUNG Curved 65in Full
 HD screen JVC Premium-grade home cinema projector TOSHIBA £120 Blu-ray deck **32IN GROUPTTEST**
 Four second-room sets on test **ROUNDUP** Eleven soundbars/soundbases go head-to-head **AND MORE!**



Sony's STR-DN1050 sports a minimalist design, but maxes out on features. See p42 for more

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

John Lewis delivers its first own-branded bigscreen TV – with a little help from LG. **John Archer** investigates

Department store home cinema

HAVING TOPPED A recent survey to find the UK's best-loved brands, it's hardly surprising that John Lewis is keen to apply that customer recognition to electrical products as well as its own stores. Cue the first bigscreen telly to wear the John Lewis moniker: the 55in 55JL9000.

Aesthetically this set fits the John Lewis bill perfectly, combining exceptional build quality with a classy-looking aluminium finish and some bold sculpting. It's also innovative; the front 'spur' of the open-framed stand (which cunningly rotates under the screen for wall mounting) crams in a 50W speaker system.

Now obviously John Lewis hasn't bought some far-flung TV manufacturing plant to build its own TVs, so you will immediately wonder where the 55JL9000 has come from. The answer arrives as soon as you switch it on and find an animated bird character guiding you through the setup process, and a WebOS-powered 'Smart+' TV interface – two features instantly recognisable from LG's 2014 TV range.

So the 55JL9000 is, in fact, a badged LG TV. Yet it's not just any badged LG TV – if you positioned it in the Korean corp's 2014 stable, it would represent the flagship Full HD model. It's the Blighty equivalent of the EISA award-winning LB870V, a screen that isn't currently on sale in the UK.

Getting Smarter

As discussed in our previous issue, the LG Smart+ interface is inspired in both the efficiency and friendliness of its presentation, and the way it treats all your content sources – USBs, streaming services, AV inputs, tuner feeds etc – as equals. It's fast and slick. The 55JL9000 ships with a 'Magic Remote' that lets you navigate its menus just by pointing the remote in the right place of the screen. The only

downer is the set's failure to offer catch-up TV apps for Channel 4, ITV and Channel 5.

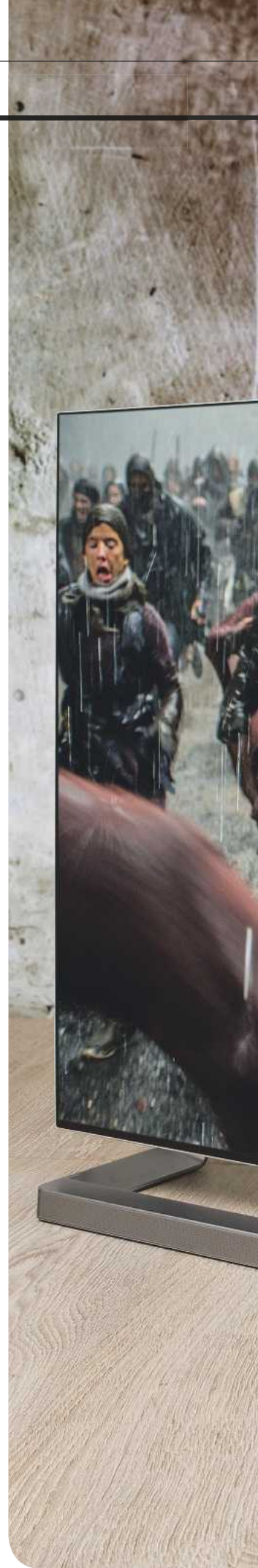
The 55JL9000 uses one of LG's Full HD IPS LED panels to deliver a wider viewing angle and, hopefully, more natural colours than other types of LCD screen. Its LED lighting is enhanced by local dimming technology, where individual sections of lighting are controlled separately to boost contrast.

The potency of the local dimming implementation can be adjusted in the TV's attractive menus, which also hold a raft of other calibration aids. Among the most useful of these are standard and MPEG noise reduction systems, motion compensation systems, contrast and sharpness boosters, plus colour, white balance and gamma management tools.

With careful control of some of these setup options – especially those relating to contrast – the 55JL9000 can deliver a mostly strong picture performance only let down by a single, predictable flaw.

Starting with the good news, a run-through of the awesome *The LEGO Movie* Blu-ray reveals the set's colours to be explosively good, giving richly saturated rein to the extreme hues of Cloud Cuckooland, for instance. Crucially, though, the colours display an impressive subtler side when I switched to the much more naturally toned *American Hustle* Blu-ray, producing tones that look authentic and free of colour banding/stripping or blocking. So subtle is the 55JL9000's colour palette, in fact, that it contributes to another picture strength: sharpness. The extreme detailing on >

The smart remote is John Lewis-branded – the other one isn't...



The JL9000's bar-shaped stand incorporates a 50W speaker system



RAIN OF TERROR
Russell Crowe saves animals two at a time in *Noah*, p96

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 55in Full HD Smart TV

POSITION: The first John Lewis-branded bigscreen TV

PEERS: Samsung UE55H8000; Sony KDL-55W955



The JL9000 sports a stylish white rear chassis

the Jaeger robots in the *Pacific Rim* Blu-ray is done full justice, bringing home the weathered, beaten look the filmmakers were after. Even standard-definition footage looks good thanks to some successful upscaling from LG's processors that avoids the frequent LCD problem of reduced colour naturalism.

The 55JL9000 delivers an awesome stereoscopic picture experience. Its passive 3D tech makes both *The LEGO Movie* and *Pacific Rim* relaxing to watch due to the absence of the flicker you get with active 3D. And that

'John Lewis' TV offers a strong all-round AV quality, a beautiful design and a brilliant Smart TV system'

passive technology also helps the screen deliver colour richness and brightness with the riotously vibrant *...LEGO Movie* that I doubt any active 3D screen could match.

Using passive 3D means there isn't as much detail and sharpness from *Pacific Rim*'s ultra-crisp pictures as you get with the best active systems – and there's some minor jaggedness around curved edges – but overall the 55JL9000's 3D images are a delight.

At first glance this TV seems strong on the contrast front, too. Typical picture content appears very dynamic. Switching to more shadowy scenes, though, reveals some problems. For starters, without any of the set's local dimming/dynamic contrast tools active, the dark caves of Gringotts in *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows: Part II* look washed out.

The local dimming engine improves things greatly, turning those unnatural greys into something much more like the blacks I'd expect of a 2014 LCD TV.

But there's a problem: the 55JL9000 has to work so hard to deliver good blacks that you can become too aware of what it's up to. For instance, even if you use the set's local dimming on its tamest setting, you sometimes see vertical bars of light around any bright objects that may appear against dark backdrops. So when Harry, Ron, Griphook and Hermione (disguised as Bellatrix) transport to a tunnel in Hogsmead, and a man bathed in light walks across the background, you can make out see a distracting stripe of light running down the screen around him. Problems like this are especially apparent when there are black bars above and below the image.

Dark scenes can look hollow, too, as the amount of light removed makes it impossible for the set to still show the subtlest shadow details. Subsequently, as Snape addresses the school and warns them to give up Harry Potter, his cape and clothes look like a black hole in the picture.

Looking for other problems, LG's motion processing throws up more processing glitches than the best rival systems. However, the screen's native motion handling is pretty good.

If you're a gamer, you'll also be alarmed by the 110ms of input lag I measured from the 55JL9000, which reduces your performance with reaction-based games.

For all the screen's picture flaws, it's worth stressing that for the vast majority of time John Lewis's debut bigscreen TV delivers pretty gorgeous images, full of verve, vibrancy, sharpness and detail. And that fancy built-in soundbar delivers a superior audio performance. Vocals are handled well, sounding rounded and consistently clear, and you get an excellent sense of the treble and mid-range subtleties that bring good soundmixes to life. High volume levels are hit without distorting or causing cabinet rattle. Bass sounds a bit squashed and boxy, though, and doesn't extend as far at the low end as trebles extend at the other.

A welcome arrival

The 55JL9000's £1,600 price perhaps sits rather uncomfortably above the £1,500 required for Samsung's UE48HU7500 48in UHD TV, and its performance isn't perfect – black level and input lag problems in particular could deter heavy-duty film and game fans. However, a strong all-round AV quality, beautiful design and brilliant Smart TV system make it a pleasure to have around ■

ON THE MENU



→ The JL9000's employment of LG's WebOS-powered interface makes source-switching and setup quick and intuitive, helped by the point-and-click 'Magic' remote

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive (two pairs of glasses supplied)

4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Scart; composite video input; optical digital audio output; built-in Wi-Fi; Ethernet

SOUND: 50W in a 2.2-channel configuration

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,227(w) x 709(h) x 34.7(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 21.2kg

FEATURES: Smart+ TV WebOS system; point and click remote included; speaker system built into rotatable stand; IPS LED panel design; built-in camera; dual-core processor; DLNA and USB file playback; 178-degree viewing angle; white balance, colour and gamma management; local dimming and dynamic contrast tools

HCC VERDICT



John Lewis 55JL9000

→ £1,600 Approx → www.johnlewis.com

→ Tel: 03456 049 049

HIGHS: Pictures usually look excellent; superb Smart interface; attractive design and good build quality; decent sonics

LOWS: Average black levels; occasionally messy light handling; high input lag; lacking in catch-up TV

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Mr Scott, energize! Who says you can't fly in an armchair: **the Excite 5.1 system.** All there is.



DYNABOARD

The STR-DN1050 is an impeccably educated mid-range AVR with a dark side. **Steve May** treads carefully

The crystal skull-crusher



Sony takes a stripped-back approach to its AVR design

LIKE MANY OF its mid-range rivals, this sharply-drawn AVR is more a revision of, than a replacement for, its predecessor – in this case Sony's best-selling STR-DN1040. Offering come-hither looks to streaming enthusiasts and movie fans alike, the new STR-DN1050 boasts a raft of forward-thinking functionality, but still caters for those on a tight budget. Can it live up to our high expectations?



AV INFO

PRODUCT: Mid-range 7.2 AV receiver

POSITION: Sony's top mid-price 7.2 model, positioned just above the £400 STR-DN850

PEERS: Onkyo TX-NR636, Yamaha RX-V577; Pioneer VSX-924

Connectivity is certainly good. The rear panel proffers a generous helping of HDMI's – five inputs (one MHL capable) and a trio of outputs, the third designed to run HDMI into a second-zone display. Two of the HDMI inputs, BD/DVD and SACD/CD, are 'optimised for audio', meaning they have the shortest signal path. There's also support for 4K resolution content passthrough and upscaling. HDMI standby passthrough allows a chosen input to remain live through to the display, even when the receiver itself is off. Legacy support is provided by component and composite inputs with matching audio. There are also two stereo audio multizone outputs and twin sub feeds.

Fascia connections comprise headphone jack and auto-calibration mic inputs, plus USB and HDMI with MHL support.

Configuration options are varied. With seven channels of amplification available, you can serve stereo sound to a second room, while running a 5.1 system in your cinema. Alternatively you can bi-amp your main theatre, or stick to a 7.1 array.

Overall build quality is also impressive. It's not the heftiest receiver around (it weighs 10kg approx), but it uses a frame and beam chassis, with embossed corners to help accommodate the weight of the transformer and heat sink. This level of intricate construction extends to the undercarriage. We've seen Sony pedicure the feet of its AVRs before, and this model is no different. Isolating additional ribs within the pads are designed to reduce vibration.

The remote itself is an unremarkable lightweight affair; I guess the brand thinks most will be using its app to do all the work.

Aerial adventures

Networking is provided through Ethernet and integrated Wi-Fi. A wireless aerial can be erected aloft if the latter is your chosen option. One curious annoyance is caused by the Ethernet port, which can be seen gleefully flashing away through the ventilated lid. When the lights dim, it looks like Borrowers are holding a party inside. One solution is not to use the wired connection at all, but instead opt for Wi-Fi. However on multiple occasions this dropped its connection, despite my using a largely bulletproof ASUS MIMO router. Wireless activity is limited to the 2.4GHz band; there's no support for 5GHz.

Streaming functionality is generous. Not only is this receiver Apple AirPlay compliant, but it has integrated Bluetooth 3.0 with apt-X, plus NFC. Owners of NFC smartphones are invited to one-touch for easy wireless pairing. NFC is, of course, horribly unreliable, so this may or may not work for you (it didn't for me).

The receiver is DLNA compliant, albeit only from an audio perspective. If you're running a NAS for your music collection, you'll be able to access this via the brand's nicely graphical UI. I was able to play FLAC, WAV, AAC, MP3 and >

Yikes! An AVR remote that isn't littered with buttons...





WMA files. It'll even unspool two-channel DSD 64 from USB (but not DSD 218 or multichannel). Music services include Music Unlimited, Deezer and Tunein, but not Spotify.

Sony rates the STR-DN1050's power output at 100W-per-channel into 6 Ohms with 0.09% THD; this is not a big-theatre volume monster then, but it does have the reserves to drive larger speakers, helpful if you're using floorstanders rather than bookshelf monitors.

If you feel the need, Sony offers ADCAC (Advanced Digital Cinema Auto Calibration), which uses some incomprehensible wangling to supposedly achieve the accuracy of multi-point acoustic measurements via a single sweep using the supplied microphone. Of course, you can manually set levels and speaker distances if you want, which

'The Sony does blockbuster action well, not averse to taking bass and using it as a weapon'

would be my recommendation. You can also further tune the receiver with a choice of presets: Full Flat, Engineer, and Front Reference. The latter uses the main L/R to phase-match the rears. My preferred option was Engineer, the most involving of the trio.

At the heart of the beast is a SHARC DSP from Analog Devices. This handles all bitstream processing, be it Dolby or DTS. Movie lovers are also offered HD-DCS (Digital Cinema Sound) post-processing, which aims to recreate the reflection and reverberation of Sony Picture's Cary Grant dubbing stage. Unfortunately, it's largely unusable as it adds an often insufferable reverb to the centre channel, making dialogue sound as though it was ADR'd in a steel shipping container. This is something of a shame as it does create a fun, exaggerated sense of width and height.

Performance-wise, the new STR-DN1050 picks up directly where the STR-DN1040 left

Unusually at this price point, the DN1050 offers three HDMI outputs, for multizone and twin-screen setups

off. For this season Sony has upgraded the power supply, sourced some oversized custom-made block electrolytic capacitors and cherry-picked audio-grade resistors for all the analogue signal paths.

Its greatest sonic asset is its enunciation. The amplifier is astonishingly precise with everything from dialogue clarity to Foley effects. Striving to delineate, almost to a fault, it's the AV equivalent of Brian Sewell. This propensity for pin-point placement means the small stuff sounds brilliant. When Tom Cruise explores the ruins of the Empire State Building (*Oblivion*), the creaks and bleeps are completely immersive; when he goes to visit his verdant valley retreat, the natural ambience is similarly all-enveloping.

Yet occasionally the AVR tries too hard to image. Consequently, I wasn't entirely convinced by some of its overhead pans. The post-credit helicopter fly-over in *Fast & Furious 6* is a case in point, as it builds at the rear, then momentarily disappears before reappearing at the L/C/R. It needs to be a tad smotherier.

The STR-DN1050 does blockbuster action well. When the Dark Knight makes his rooftop escape in the Tumbler (*Batman Begins*), the visceral force of the Batmobile's oversized wheels literally thumps around the soundstage. This receiver is not averse to taking bass and using it as a weapon, and this unruly tendency adds considerable excitement to 24: *To Live Another Day* (Sky One, 5.1), throwing weight and energy into the copious firefights. It's dynamic and handles transient delivery well.

Accomplished, affordable

The STR-DN1050 should be considered an accomplished mid-priced receiver. It tackles your Blu-ray collection with crystalline imaging and brutal bass, while its feature set makes it just as relevant to those looking for an audio hub as traditional movie enthusiasts. While there are some caveats, these are easily accommodated when you remember this receiver sells for a meagre £500 ■

ON THE MENU



→ Sony continues to rule the roost in terms of AVR user interfaces, with a highly polished and easy to use graphical display that's far removed from the text-based options of its rivals

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 100W (6 Ohms, 0.09% THD)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Second-zone audio plus HDMI
AV INPUTS: 2 x composite; 3 x digital audio (2 x optical and 1 x coaxial)
HDMI: 6 x inputs; 3 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 3,840 x 2,160
COMPONENT VIDEO: 2 x inputs; 1 x output
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 172(h) x 329(d)mm
WEIGHT: 10.3kg
ALSO FEATURING: AirPlay; Bluetooth apt-X; NFC; Apple iOS and Android control apps; ADCAC (Advanced Digital Cinema Auto Calibration) RoomEQ; sound optimiser; Sony HD Digital Cinema Sound preset; DLNA audio playback (includes MP3, WMA, FLAC, AAC, DSD 64); Ethernet; integrated Wi-Fi; USB; Music Unlimited, Deezer and Tunein streaming services; twin subwoofer outputs

HCC VERDICT



Sony STR-DN1050

→ £500 Approx → www.sony.co.uk
 → Tel: 0207 3652413

HIGHS: Excellent spatial imaging; comprehensive streaming music options; good file support; highly dynamic; great graphical UI
LOWS: Bass can get unruly; sometimes a little too precise; integrated Wi-Fi drops connection; no Spotify

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

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There's no turning back once you've heard DALI's inventive Rubicon LCR speakers, says **Steve May**. On-wall is on trend...

Home theatre crosses the Rubicon

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

On-wall full-range speaker array

POSITION:

Joined in the Rubicon family by floorstanders and bookshelf alternatives

PEERS:

Robson Acoustics Chronos;
Monitor Audio Shadow;
Artcooustic SL Series



THE RUBICON LCR is quite a departure for DALI, a brand traditionally associated with floorstanders and stand-mounted enclosures. An on-wall design (just 142mm deep), it's hoping to find a spot in dedicated theatre rooms where design is a concern, yet without conceding any performance ground.

The speakers feature a smart curved grille, hiding a distinctive hybrid electrostatic ribbon/29mm soft dome tweeter. DALI has been experimenting with hybrid tweeters since the early 1990s and now appears to have the technology pretty much nailed (through a process of trial and error, it admits).

Build quality is excellent. The seven-litre cabinet is made from solid MDF and is beautifully finished. The LCR is part of a wider

family of Rubicon speakers, which also includes the stand-mount Rubicon 2 and Rubicon 5, 6 and 8 floorstanders. The range is available in black or white lacquers, or rosso and walnut veneers. We had the latter.

Although expensive at £875 per unit, these Rubicons have DNA derived directly from the brand's flagship proposition, the Epicon. They sport a simplified version of the brand's SMC (Soft Magnetic Compound) Linear Drive

system, said to deliver around 60 per cent of the distortion reduction offered by the Epicon, but for about 40 per cent of the price. For users, it's a classic trickle-down benefit.

Sensitivity is rated at 89dB, making for a good match for better-than-budget AV receivers and up. Ideally, the LCR should be wall-mounted for both the best aesthetic and an additional bass lift, although you can shelf- or table-mount if preferred (little rubber feet are provided). Just remember to leave a 10cm distance to the wall.

If you're looking to use the LCR as a full-blown 5.1 channel system (as we've done here), the hybrid tweeter module is rotatable, allowing you to configure a box horizontally for centre duties; four Allen bolts need to be removed and the tweeter rotated, before being secured again. Joining the tweeter is a 5.5in



The LCR's hybrid tweeter module rotates for centre channel use



You can mount them on a shelf or table, but the LCRs are primed for on-wall use

wood-fibre woofer that uses the thin metal sheet on the back panel as a bass port, effectively adding capacity to the box. This cone is terminated in a low-loss rubber surround designed to maximise movement.

Setup is reasonably straightforward. The dispersion characteristics of the Rubicon LCRs mean they should not be towed in to face the listening position. In fact, as befits an on-wall, they're designed to face square-out. Similarly, rears need to stare uniformly back. Plan for not so much the classic ITU surround sound circle but a perfect square. This positioning creates a huge open soundfield into which you can pitch your tent. Aim to have the hybrid tweeter level with your ears.

Obviously, having identical speakers fore and aft means there's no problem with timbre or phase. Panning from front to rear, plus every which way between, is seamless. When the fish sing the funeral march in *Doctor Seuss' The Lorax*, as we ride down a river on our bed (don't ask), the audio doesn't splash or wobble in the slightest; the pan is effortlessly convincing.

The LCRs also drop deeper than you might imagine for such slim cabinets and have an uncanny ability to delineate complex mixes. During the bombastic Little Hansel sequence in *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, the score portentously chimes in after trees have been splintered by the massive missile and Holmes and crew knocked to the floor by the concussive blast. It's a dramatic moment, given extra impact by this Rubicon quintet, not least because the scoring orchestra now appears to be ensconced amid the forestry.

DALI suggests the system does not need a subwoofer. Indeed, if you're looking to run a two-channel array positioned either side of a screen, I'd concur. These boxes go low; they begin to make their presence felt north of 30Hz, but are at their smoothest and most pronounced from 50Hz upwards. That said, dedicated LFE is an intrinsic part of any

multichannel setup, so for this review DALI supplied the SUB P-10 DSS, which sports a downward-firing 10in cone, supported by two sideways-facing 10in passives, and has a 300W power plant. This retails for £1,900 – the brand stresses that, as there is no Rubicon woofer, buyers are invited to peruse the whole DALI sub range, which begins at £350, choosing based on budget and room size.

Waking up wide-eyed

Thanks to that ribbon tweeter, the dispersion pattern of these Rubicons is CinemaScope wide. When Tom Cruise wakes for the first time in the Scab lair (*Oblivion*, Blu-ray), the naturalistic echoes immediately suggest the unseen underground bunker is huge. The reverberation around Morgan Freeman's sonorous tones conveys space and weight.

Similarly, the opening car duel in *Fast and Furious 6* is fought on a road that sounds twice as wide as that on more pointy systems. The LCRs do the gutty, gear change thing really well too, yet this doesn't interfere with topky tyre-screaming detail. They also positively stomp the hip-hop soundtrack.

The Rubicons are as adept with music as they are fun with movies. DALI CEO Lars Worre confided to me that the brand doesn't tune its speakers with high-res audio files, preferring instead to optimise for conventional CD. This actually seems to make a good deal of sense, given the ongoing ubiquity of discs. Of course, it doesn't prevent the speakers excelling with higher-resolution fare.

Minus The Bear's *Listing*, a 96kHz/24-bit multichannel DTS track, is rendered wide and spacious, with crisp centre-locked audio and insistent left-side riffing, before the rest of the band take the stage. The speakers sound light and flighty. By contrast, Nine Inch Nails' album *The Slip* (96kHz/24-bit FLAC) is all raw, surging, electronic energy not easily mastered. *1,000,000* is a multi-layered and pulsing piece, yet these DALIs are unphased, deciphering with trademark separation. And even though *The Slip* is stereophonic, the LCRs create a towering wall of sound, not needing a multiplicity of physical boxes or DSP to create total sonic immersion. It's quite a trick. These relatively small enclosures also image with uncanny precision; when Bowie intros *Future Legend* on the two-channel *Diamond Dogs* (SHM-CD, Japanese import), you would swear he was speaking from the idle centre speaker.

So DALI's Rubicon LCR is proof you can achieve epic multichannel audio without sacrificing floor space, bringing an audiophile level of clarity and presence to the on-wall form factor. Capable of superb delineation and spatial imaging, they're thrilling when deployed as a 5.1 package, and instantly engaging as a two-channel upgrade for any wall-mounted screen. The Rubicon's have an innate ability to make sense of everything. Shortlist them! ■

SPECIFICATIONS

RUBICON LCR ON-WALL

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x hybrid ribbon/29mm soft dome tweeter; 1 x 5.5in wood-fibre midbass
ENCLOSURE: Sealed, bass reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 59Hz-34kHz
SENSITIVITY: 89dB
POWER HANDLING: 20W-150W
DIMENSIONS: 465(w) x 278(h) x 142(d)mm
WEIGHT: 8kg

DALI SUB P-10 DSS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in carbon-fibre active driver; 2 x 10in carbon-fibre passive drivers
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20Hz-250Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 300W continuous/500W peak
REMOTE CONTROL: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 370(h) x 340(w) x 340(d)mm
WEIGHT: 19.5kg
CONNECTIONS: Mono phono LFE; stereo phono

HCC VERDICT



DALI Rubicon LCR

→ £6,275 approx → www.dali-speakers.com
 → 0845 644 3537

HIGHS: Full-range performance LCR; sensational detail and spatial imaging; impeccable build quality

LOWS: Ribbon tweeter may be acquired taste; relatively large for on-walls

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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**ROOM
SERVICE**

We check in to
*The Grand
Budapest Hotel*
on BD, p101

The TX-47AS740 frames its Full
HD screen in a slim brushed bezel

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 47in Full HD 3D TV

POSITION: A step down from the top of
Panasonic's Full HD range, below the AS802s

PEERS: Sony KDL-50W829; Samsung
UE46H7000

Brilliant Smart TV features can't disguise some picture issues on this Panasonic Full HD TV, says **John Archer**

Not quite a master of the black arts

MUCH AS I miss Panasonic's often-brilliant plasma TVs, the decision to leave the technology behind seems to have galvanised the company into a frenzy of feature and design innovation that's rapidly demolishing the Japanese brand's previously rather conservative image.

Indeed, 2014 has seen it embracing multiroom audio, widening its soundbar stable, grabbing THX certification for its top-tier Blu-ray player and, most importantly, targeting the LCD LED TV market with a vast range of smart-looking – and Smart – screens ready to do battle with their big-brand rivals.

I'm reminded of this fresh post-plasma approach as soon as I clap eyes on the TX-47AS740. This 47in LCD TV screams 'look at me' in a way Panasonic's PDPs seldom did, sporting a mixture of brushed metal finish and ultra-minimal bar-style stand that is instantly alluring. But will its performance prove as attractive?

Digital drought

Before even turning it on, part of my initial buzz is wiped away by discovering that it only offers three HDMI inputs, where rival manufacturers typically supply four. Perhaps Panasonic has done some market research that proves people only need three. If so, they didn't ask me.

Compensation comes in the form of three USBs, Ethernet and Wi-Fi network options and an SD card slot. The latter is hardly a deal-clincher, but it's easy to underestimate its usefulness for digital camera/camcorder owners wanting quick playback.

The TX-47AS740 provides a wealth of picture calibration tools, including colour and white balance management alongside a welcome backlight slider – something I've been wanting Panasonic to include on its LCD TVs for ages. You're also given plenty of control

over the TV's various dual-core-driven picture processing elements, including the brand's impressive Intelligent Frame Creation (with different settings) for reducing judder and blur when showing motion.

The TX-47AS740 employs an IPS panel supporting passive 3D playback, with two pairs of 3D glasses included.

Now, while I appreciate the slightly wider viewing angle – and flicker-free 3D – that you get with passive 3D IPS panels, the TX-47AS740 also exhibits some negative picture traits associated with IPS technology.

Coping with Kill Bill

The fundamental problem is that IPS panels don't seem able to deliver such deep black levels as different LCD panel types, something that's also a factor with the John Lewis JL9000 screen reviewed on p38. Watching dark film scenes on the TX-47AS740, like the sequence where *The Bride* is buried alive in *Kill Bill: Volume 2*, reveals a very average native contrast performance, with lots of greyness where there should be absorbing blackness. Or, at least, that's the case if you leave the set's adaptive backlight feature untouched and don't severely rein in the backlight setting.

With the adaptive backlight system active and the LED illumination set as low as its 35 per cent level the TX-47AS740 does deliver the burial sequence with a decent black colour. However, this much-improved

Two remotes are supplied: one standard, one with a touchpad



The top of the chassis houses a built-in camera



performance comes at a price, with the Panasonic (as with the JL9000) having to remove so much brightness to achieve a black colour that heavy amounts of shadow detail get pushed out of the image, leaving dark areas looking flat and uninviting.

The *Kill Bill* buried alive sequence also reveals that the TX-47AS740 turns off its backlighting completely to handle extremely dark shots – or fades to black – resulting in a telltale brightness ‘jump’ when the backlight fires back up.

Let there be light!

The lack of brightness in images once you’ve calibrated them to get the best contrast is particularly unfortunate, as Panasonic’s screen is capable of pumping out serious levels of brightness and well-saturated colours when using its presets with bright source material.

'From customisable home screens to built-in Freetime catchup, Panasonic's Smart platform impresses'

I'd be happy employing these presets for watching typical daytime TV material or sporting events. In fact, with content that doesn't expose its contrast problems the TX-47AS740 is a handy performer. During well-lit sequences, such as *The Bride's* opening scrap with Vernita Green, colours appear very punchy and rich, yet still natural (notwithstanding a slight lack of finesse in the way subtle skin tone blends are delivered). The action-packed bloodbath at the House of Blue Leaves, meanwhile, reveals a strong motion performance, keeping judder and blur interference low without creating many unnatural side effects, so long as you don't get overenthusiastic with the IFC system. I stuck to its lowest-strength setting.

Despite this, it must be said that the TX-47AS740's HD images aren't the sharpest.

Yet they can't be characterised as soft either, and it's arguable, too, that the Panasonic's smooth, clean presentation is preferable to the sort of hyper sharpness that can lead to noise.

The TX-47AS740 also proves a fun performer with my *Pacific Rim* 3D Blu-ray. Its stereoscopic images look clean, colourful, bright and quite detailed by passive standards, and the slight dimming effect of donning the lightweight 3D glasses works in a way to reduce the TV's contrast problems. The vertical viewing

angle before crosstalk sets in is extremely limited, which could be an issue if you sit quite near your TV, but otherwise 3D is potentially the TX-47AS740's biggest attraction.

Console owners will be interested in the screen's input lag – the time it takes to render images after receiving image data at its inputs. My tests recorded a figure of 66ms. This is unfortunately around twice as high as I'd ideally like to see.

The 47AS740 partners its hit and miss pictures with an audio performance that combines a wide and potent mid-range with enough treble clarity to handle *Kill Bill's* shrieky music and impactful fighting effects without sounding harsh or vague. A lack of bass stops it rivaling the very best audio performers, but it still sounds decent overall for a mid-range flatscreen.

The TV's network features combine streaming from DLNA-capable devices and access to the brand's retweaked Smart Viera platform. This delivers some truly innovative features, ranging from the My Home Screen concept of fully customisable content jump-off screens to the new MyStream content aggregation interface (which can seem a bit overwhelming with its sliding panels of suggested material) and TV Anywhere, which lets you stream your USB recordings and tuner feeds to portable smart devices anywhere in the world. The whole package is eminently usable. Even better, the TX-47AS740 carries built-in Freetime, letting you access all the key UK broadcast channels' catch-up services via the natty 7-day backwards electronic programme guide.

Contrast culprit

While it's clear from its Smart features that Panasonic continues to be a genuine TV innovator, viewing the TX-47AS740 can be frustrating at times, with its contrast performance the key culprit – its HD images can be delightful, but even judicious use of its calibration tools and backlight functions can't iron out those black level niggles. That said, the fact that it can be found selling for just £900 will win it fans ■

ON THE MENU



→ Panasonic's long-standing relationship with Freesat now brings the Freetime service to its Smart TVs, ensuring a healthy VOD selection navigable from the EPG

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive (two pairs of glasses supplied)
4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD; satellite
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; component video; composite video; stereo analogue audio; optical digital audio; 3 x USB; SD card slot; Ethernet; built-in Wi-Fi

SOUND: 2 x 20W

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,074(w) x 625(h) x 53(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 13.5kg

FEATURES: Smart Viera system including TV Anywhere, My Stream, customisable My Home Screen interface and video-on-demand; dual-core processing; multimedia playback from USB, DLNA and SD card slot; integrated camera; calibration options including colour management and white balance; adaptive backlight system; touchpad controller

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic TX-47AS740

→ £1,050 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Good design; impressive 3D picture quality; bright scenes look good; some excellent Smart features

LOWS: Below-par contrast performance; limited vertical viewing angle with 3D; only three HDMI

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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The ultimate guide to soundbars



Thinking of adding a soundbar or soundbase to your flatscreen TV? **Team HCC** is ready with some buying advice – and a roundup of potential purchases

THE SOUND PERFORMANCE of a modern flatscreen can often disappoint. There are one or two exceptions, but a lot have cutting-edge slimscreen looks without the sonic qualities to match. Some kind of supplement to boost their aural performance – even for regular daytime use – is desired.

While home cinema enthusiasts will prefer a genuine multichannel system using a separate amp and traditional speakers, there are homes or rooms where funds, space or an antipathy towards clutter rule that out.

The solution is to get yourself a soundbar – or soundbase – which combines an amplifier and speaker drivers in one cabinet, delivering an instant audio upgrade without the mess.

The beauty of a soundbar is that it can transform your enjoyment of TV viewing and, depending on its features, act as the conduit for a range of digital and analogue sources, including audio streamed from phones, computers and tablets. Another positive point is that there are plenty of them to choose from, with everyone from the global AV giants to speaker brands and multiroom maestros getting in on the act. But there are things to consider before you rush out and buy...

Drivers, amps and woofer



Most soundbars have a 2.1 driver configuration. In other words, stereo drivers with an LFE/ bass channel. Other configurations are available, including 3.1 (stereo and LFE plus a centre dialogue speaker) and even 5.1 (with side-firing 'surround' drivers). There are one or two passive soundbars available that require separate power, but generally they're driven by internal amps – claimed power output varies from as low as 60W to over 450W.

The narrow shape of most soundbars is not generally conducive to crafting thumping bass; many models are supplied with a separate subwoofer, either wired or wireless. This will bring benefits to both movies and music, but some of the larger soundbars with built-in woofers do a reasonable job. Subs that use wireless RF connectivity provide more flexibility in placement (although a nearby power socket is still required).

The more recent soundbase design has less need for an external woofer, as the larger footprint can accommodate bigger drivers and bass ports. That said, soundbases usually don't deliver as much low-end grunt as a separate sub.

Size and shape



The size and shape of a soundbar/soundbase is important, requiring more consideration than most other AV components because they

have to match the size and location of your display. Ideally, a soundbar should sit just beneath your screen. Yet it's often not that simple, thanks partly to the trend for pedestal TV stands that provide a gap of only a few centimetres between tabletop and bottom of the bezel. A solution is to place the screen back a bit and use a flattish soundbar. This is not particularly elegant, though, and often prevents you from reading any display. Much better is to buy an AV stand with a full width shelf that can accommodate the 'bar.

If your TV is wall-mounted, installation is obviously much easier. You can even get pivoting mounts that accommodate a soundbar, so when you angle the screen the 'bar doesn't remain flat to the wall..

A soundbase acts as a plinth for your TV, so it needs to be wide enough for the TV's stand. So measure up, and check the weight of your screen, too – most soundbases can accommodate heavy loads, but it's a case of better safe than sorry.

What connections do you need?



How you hook up your soundbar can profoundly affect the quality of the audio you hear and connecting a soundbar to a TV (or

other AV source) is not as straightforward as you might think. It's often dictated by the types of inputs and outputs on your kit and by the way in which everything handles various audio sources.

There are several options, with digital optical, HDMI and analogue aux line-in connections being the most commonly used. Which you should employ will be partly down to the soundbar's decoding capabilities (if any) and the way in which your TV (or other source) outputs audio signals.

Some soundbars have multiple HDMI inputs along with Dolby Digital and DTS decoding, and this configuration is the most convenient. Not only can you use the soundbar as a switcher, you can connect your TV's ARC (audio return channel) HDMI to the HDMI ARC socket on the soundbar, and plumb in a Blu-ray deck or PVR directly to the soundbar's other HDMI inputs, rather than using the TV as a hub. Soundbars with HDMI inputs can often handle lossless DTS-HD MA and Dolby Digital TrueHD signals, although many will only decode the core 5.1 DTS or DD soundtrack.

For soundbars without HDMI the next best option is the optical input. Here, though, DTS and Dolby Digital decoding often go AWOL, but they can all handle PCM signals. The key is to make sure your screen can output all incoming DD and DTS sources as PCM. Be wary of the screen that can't convert its Freeview or Freesat tuner's Dolby Digital signals to PCM unless you're definitely buying a soundbar with DD decoding.

How much should I spend?



For a second room a budget model (up to £150) will suit requirements but having spent a serious sum on your flatscreen it pays not to scrimp

— after all, you want a performance with movies, dramas, sport and music that comfortably outdoes your TV. Yet more money doesn't just get you bigger drivers and more power, it can buy you better and more convenient connectivity, the ability to process surround sound signals and most importantly, more refined performance thanks to superior components and build quality. Of course, performance is the one thing you won't be able to judge without a demo, so make sure you try before you buy.

Surround sound



There's a lot of confusion about surround sound and soundbars. Many models offer 'virtual' sound modes, which create a wider soundfield

achieved by digital signal processing. A small number of models, such as Yamaha's high-end sound projectors, use processing to separate out individual channels, reflected off walls to deliver rear effects. Beyond these, though, our advice is to be prepared to stick to traditional stereo. A good soundbar should still be able to make a front soundstage sound deep and involving.

Like TVs and home cinema amplifiers, many soundbars have DSP modes that alter the EQ according to the genre of material — eg. sports mode, action mode, classical music mode. These vary massively in terms of effectiveness and aren't automatically a sign of a better model compared with a soundbar that offers basic treble and bass adjustment.

This exploded image of Sonos' Playbar shows its complex driver arrangement. Less expensive soundbars typically stick to stereo configuration



The sound of music



In addition to over-riding your TV's speakers, a soundbar can, depending on its connections, be used for listening to music from a range of sources.

Analogue phono inputs will work with a CD deck while a 3.5mm aux line in will hook up to the headphone jack of a smartphone or tablet.

Some soundbars sport USB sockets with iPod playback compatibility — although some USBs are provided just for charging your iPhone or similar. More convenient than a tethered connection is to stream wirelessly, which many soundbars now do thanks to Bluetooth audio streaming. Bluetooth has grown from a niche technology into a user-friendly music playback option, aided by the apt-X standard which delivers CD-quality sonics. Not all models have apt-X, so look out for it in the spec.

Also useful, but not as common as Bluetooth, is DLNA streaming, allowing a soundbar/soundbase to gorge on music files stored on a home network. This tends to be a feature of higher-end models that have wired and/or wireless Ethernet functionality.

SOUNDBARS ON TEST

Over the page we audition eleven soundbars and soundbases — some brand new, some old favourites — covering all sizes and budgets

Canton DM 50

A Bluetooth soundbase with premium construction

Focal Dimension

A premium system combining a soundbar with a soundbase-style subwoofer

Humax STE-1000BSW

A super-slim 'bar' for discreet installations

Panasonic SC-HTB880

Offers a 5.1 driver array and 4K signal passthrough

Philips HTL9100

Wireless detachable speakers provide genuine surround sound

Pioneer SBX-N500

A mid-price soundbar with a side-line in DLNA music streaming — and even YouTube

Q Acoustics Media 4

A chunky 'bar' with a no-nonsense approach

Samsung HW-H750

Valve amp tech is among the features on offer here

Sonos Playbar

An indispensable addition to the Sonos eco-system

Sony HT-CT770

This will even stream audio from your Netflix app...

Tannoy BaseStation One

The audio brand's debut soundbase speaker

Humax STE-1000BSW

Can a thin soundbar deliver full-fat sonics? Brit brand Humax certainly hopes so



HUMAX CLAIMS THE STE-1000BSW is the world's thinnest soundbar, being just 2cm deep. Yet height is more important when mounting on a table top, and when perched on its (rather flimsy) stand the unit is a considerable 66mm high. Either way, it's incredibly light, weighing about the same as its external power brick. It comes with a passive rear-firing subwoofer (not pictured), which feels a bit thrown together – think bargain-basement MDF and rough edges.

The 'bar' itself is of much better build quality, and the fuss-free remote puts most other manufacturers' efforts to shame.

Power is quoted as 160W with 100W going to the sub and 30W to each of the L and R

channels. Socketry is rudimentary, comprising optical and 3.5mm inputs, but at least Bluetooth (not apt-X) is provided. There's no multichannel decoding but you can boost the bass and check out a surround mode.

The STE-1000BSW delivers a surprisingly powerful sound, vastly superior to many TV speakers. It does a pretty decent job with most material, although its modes don't exactly do what you'd expect – watching Tour de France coverage on ITV4, the commentary had more low-end, and more resonance, when the surround mode was engaged. With Blu-ray movies, such as *Rise of the Guardians*, the soundstage is broad and cohesive, with individual effects – cracking ice for example

– hitting your ears nicely. Dialogue can sound a little thin, however, and cranking the volume up leads to distortion. Bass, especially with music, is also not particularly refined.

Overall, the STE-1000BSW does a reasonable job for its bargain price, but I'd suggest it's better equipped for wall-mounting than placing on a stand.

HCC VERDICT

Humax STE-1000BSW → £180

Overall ★★★★★

£350 approx → www.tannoy.co.uk

Tannoy BaseStation One

This debut soundbase speaker packs a prominent bass punch. You'd better like it...

THIS HULKING SLAB of a soundbase is more solid than the Queen's grip on the throne. It features a three-way speaker system, with two 19mm tweeters, two 3in mid-range cones and a pair of oblong woofers – unusually for a soundbase, the bass drivers face forward rather than downwards. Socketry selection is reasonable, Tannoy says 'no' to HDMI but 'yes' to optical and stereo phono, plus apt-X-enabled Bluetooth with NFC pairing.

A single LED on the fascia briefly conveys status information upon each command from the ugly, mini remote. EQ adjustment and bass management are not provided and

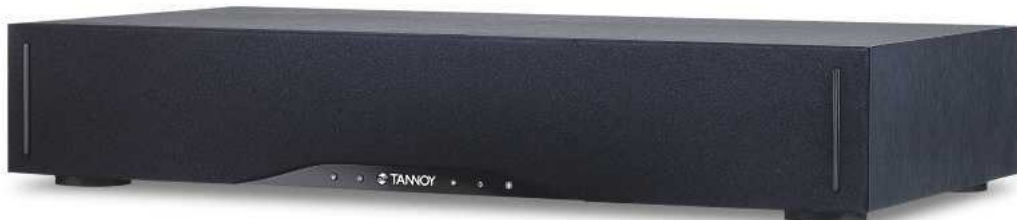
there are no user modes aside from one called 3D, which is supposed to create a broader soundstage. From my experience, the 3D mode works by boosting some frequencies at the expense of others. During a scene in *Mad Men* it thins Don Draper's fulsome voice while increasing the background traffic coming from 5th Ave. In other words, vocals are weaker and high frequencies sound more ethereal.

Even with more action-packed soundtracks from Blu-rays such as *Super 8* and *Sherlock Holmes: a Game of Shadows* I'd suggest the 3D mode is to be avoided. The Little Hansel rocket scene in the latter proves that the BaseStation

has impressive room-filling power and decent clarity but it's a somewhat clinical sound. Higher frequencies, such as the launcher clanging, are close to shrill.

Another slight problem is an overly dominant bass, which is more evident with music. The astonishingly deep double bass at the start of Diana Krall's *My Love* throbs so much it'll frighten your lug-holes. Likewise, when Chris Jones sings *Darlin'* Cory the vocals are excellent but it's frustrating not to be able to temper the low-end.

A strong (and rugged) debut from Tannoy, then, but lacking a little finesse.



HCC VERDICT

Tannoy BaseStation One → £350

Overall ★★★★★

Samsung HW-H750

This 'bar' marries plenty of bonus features to a controlled, detailed delivery

THE HW-H750 (ALSO available in white as the HW-H751) is Samsung's flagship soundbar, offering a tube valve amplifier stage (which should produce a warmer sound), dual orientation (flat or upright), Bluetooth and the ability to integrate into a Samsung multiroom system. File format support includes Dolby Digital and DTS (but not hi-res variants) and FLAC, WAV, AAC and ALAC via USB. It'll even automatically make a wireless connection with a 2014 Samsung TV. I'm rather surprised it can't make the tea.

Connectivity covers most requirements including an HDMI in and out with ARC, one optical

socket, Ethernet, a 3.5mm aux line in and a USB. Thick cables are hard to fit and can make it awkward to lay the soundbar properly flat.

On the front is a handy six-character scrolling OLED display window just next to the charming orange tube valve. You can choose the mode and adjust volume using buttons on the front panel or the Kit-Kat sized (two fingers) remote, which is nicely laid out. Build quality is fine.

The HW-H750 divvies up its 320W power equally between the sub and soundbar, with 40W per each of its four main channels. It takes five seconds to get going but sound quality is

very good with TV and Blu-ray. It is massively affected by which of its five DSP modes you select – for example, the balance between dialogue and background during cycling on ITV is much better in Cinema mode than standard. All in all, though, there's plenty of power to cope with lively action movies, such as *Skyfall* on BD. The tube train crash is meaty but always controlled; details such as dust settling and bricks falling are wonderfully distinct on top of a layer of solid low-frequencies. It has a musical bent, too – Martin Garrix's *Animals* proved totally engaging – so it's only the price tag that's a real concern.



HCC VERDICT

Samsung HW750 → £600

Overall ★★★★★

£400 approx → www.unlimited.com/canton

Canton DM 50

The highlights here are the sturdy build quality and even-handed sound quality

AVAILABLE IN EITHER black or white finishes, Canton's DM 50 may seem expensive at £400 but it's definitely worth the outlay.

Design and build are sturdy and unassuming. Canton claims it can bear a 40kg load – more important are its dimensions of 54 x 30cm. It's big, but note that some larger flatscreens with their in vogue 'open' stands will struggle to perch on top. There are no HDMI inputs to get excited about, but digital optical and coaxial jacks

provide a pathway for PCM signals. Wireless Bluetooth audio is compatible with the CD-quality apt-X codec.

The DM 50 offers 200W of power to its tweeters, two mid-range drivers and dual underside woofers. Low-end response is rated at 40Hz, with a subwoofer line out on hand for supplementary grunt if you want it. A fair degree of customisation is offered, with three positioning presets,

treble/bass management, lip-sync adjustment and a virtual surround mode. Like the Tannoy BaseStation One, the surround mode merely disperses sound at the expense of dialogue sharpness but stick to straight 2.1 mode and the performance here is excellent – even muttered dialogue is always intelligible and effects such as clanking metal, explosions and the crash-landing in the snow in *Iron Man 3* resonate with clarity and impact. Music is another strong point; Jeff Buckley's *So Real* (via Bluetooth) offers tremendous bass thump and smooth vocal reproduction. An essential audition.



HCC VERDICT

Canton DM 50 → £400

Overall ★★★★★

Q Acoustics Media 4

High price – but high-quality as well

UNLIKE THE PANASONIC SC-HTB880 (see p63), design was clearly not near the top of the priority list when Q Acoustics set about imagining its new Media 4 soundbar. Put bluntly, it is as attractive as Boris Johnson in a leotard, and at over 10cm high (including the feet) and 14cm deep, there's no chance of simply sticking it in front of a contemporary screen slouching low on its stand.

But the Media 4 redeems itself with an impressive mid-range specification, including a rock-solid construction and 2.75in full-range BMR drivers, plus a built-in, downward-firing 150mm x 120mm elliptical-design subwoofer. The unit eschews both HDMI and Dolby Digital (set your outputs to PCM) but socketry includes an optical input, stereo phonos, 3.5mm line-in and apt-X-equipped Bluetooth.

Operation is more or less a case of scrolling through the inputs (indicated by a coloured LED) as there are no DSP modes to play



around with – what you hear is what you get – but you can add an additional powered subwoofer. One setup niggle I found is that if the aux line-in is hooked up the stereo phonos are disabled.

Crash, bang, wallop

The joy of the Media 4 is not in its looks but in its performance. The classic train crash sequence in *Super 8* on Blu-ray is a cacophonous plethora of effects, including flying wreckage, the train whistle, wind howling, kids screaming, the camera winding through and the explosion on an almost nuclear scale. The Media 4 does a sterling job with the lot, generating a broad, powerful

soundstage and delivering its sonic goods with refinement. Dialogue sounds rich, warm and is well-projected, but most impressive is the subwoofer array and the soundbar's handling of low frequencies, which is both potent and yet surprisingly nuanced.

Music is also a pleasure to listen to. Like the Samsung HW-H750, the Q Acoustics provides both real punch and strict control, and the unit's BMR drivers delivers a good sense of stereo imaging.

If you can find the space to accommodate it, this is a great one-box option.

HCC VERDICT

Q Acoustics Media 4 → £400

Overall ★★★★★

£600 approx → www.sonos.com

Sonos Playbar

A TV speaker that can be expanded into a full wireless home theatre system? Intriguing

SONOS' PLAYBAR IS one of the most popular models around, as it can be integrated into the brand's multiroom eco-system. A substantial piece of kit running 90cm wide, it's clearly designed to partner larger displays, and can be orientated horizontally or vertically. It hides its drivers behind a dark fabric grille.

Connectivity is lacklustre, with just a

pair of Ethernet jacks and a single optical digital audio input. There's no HDMI, which seems like a missed opportunity at this price point. Installation is therefore a doddle, although with no remote you'll need to get the Playbar on a network via Ethernet and download the Sonos Controller app.

As a solo solution, the Playbar impresses with a depth and richness to its output that easily eclipses the squawking of the average flatscreen. It produces a veritable wall of sound that's broad and solid. It

utilises nine drivers, six mid-woofers and

three tweeters, two of which aim out from the edges to create the widest possible soundfield. Avoid full volume though, as the output becomes shard-like and unpleasant.

The idea that you can use the Playbar with the Sonos SUB and some of its Play series speakers to create a multichannel setup is great in theory, but awkward in practice. The results are fun, but no HDMI means you'll need your TV to act as a 5.1-gorging hub. Furthermore, with the SUB alone costing another £600, the array quickly becomes very expensive. Those with existing Sonos hardware should definitely apply, though.



HCC VERDICT

Sonos Playbar → £600

Overall ★★★★★

Sony HT-CT770



Following a slim-line Bluetooth model and a premium multi-driver option, Sony now takes aim at the middle ground with the HT-CT770.

Adrian Justins believes it's just about succeeded



YOU COULD BE forgiven for thinking that the HT-CT770 had fallen over on its backside, but the styling is deliberate. Sony, much like Panasonic and its HTB880, takes a laid back approach to the problem of fitting a soundbar in a space that's narrower than the gap between Jim Carrey's front teeth.

So long as you don't mind pushing your screen back a few inches on its tabletop stand, this 5cm-high solution works pretty well, and Sony deserves credit for an LCD display that's readable when sitting opposite the unit.

There are three HDMI inputs and one output that can accept the Audio Return Channel from a flatscreen. Impressively, these can accept a range of undecoded signals up to and including DTS-HD MA and Dolby Digital TrueHD, which get distilled into a 2.1 soundfield with 50W for each front channel. There's also an optical input (Dolby Digital compatible) and a 3.5mm aux line in, plus Bluetooth, which supports NFC pairing and AAC but doesn't offer apt-X quality streaming. Also wireless is the 120W active subwoofer, which has a 6.25in downward-firing driver.

Build and design quality of the sub and the main bar are both reasonable, but not in the higher echelons of materials and craftsmanship. The recessed jack pack only just provides enough space depth-wise to hide your cables' plugs and if mounted on a wall the cables will stick out upwards from the back in a most untidy fashion. There's versatility here. The Sony has a

slew of DSP modes, which are all easily accessed from the chunky remote control. Delving in to a folder-based Amp menu provides access to parameters such as bass, treble, Dynamic Range Control and HDMI CEC (plus passthrough for 4K up to 60fps). Alternatively, you can operate the bar using Sony's SongPlay app, connecting via Bluetooth. This also lets you channel audio directly from apps such as Spotify, TuneIn radio and even Netflix – you can watch a movie on your phone or tablet whilst listening to audio from the 'bar.

Full-on sonics

Close your eyes and you'd be hard pressed to tell that the HT-CT770's drivers are angled towards the ceiling. The unit manages to create a powerful sound that has admirable room-filling qualities even at medium levels of volume. This is just as well, as it doesn't cope well with higher volumes where it starts to sound cramped and indistinct.

Using HDMI to get jiggy with some DTS-HD MA action and Ben Stiller's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* proves the unit is adept at handling hi-res soundtracks. When Walter imagines scrapping with his boss in the lift and ends up in the street, you get a terrifically enveloping soundfield as glass shatters. Then they fall in a truck and the bass blends nicely as the vehicle revs and accelerates. The sound of tarmac tearing is particularly effective.

Yet dialogue during quieter moments doesn't have the clarity you'd expect. It's all the more evident with broadcast material. Ian Botham yelping 'Six!' on Sky Sports sounds a bit like 'Sixsh!'.

So, while the Sony HT-CT770 ticks all of the boxes in terms of features, practicality and usability (out-doing much of the competition, actually), its sonic delivery is not a complete success. Worth considering, though

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2.5in woofers; 2 x .75in tweeters

AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): 100W

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI in; 1 x HDMI output (ARC); 1 x digital optical audio; 1 x 3.5mm aux line in

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: Yes/Yes

SEPARATE SUB: Yes. 120W, 6.25in downward-firing driver

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 1,030(w) x 50(h) x 113(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.6kg

FEATURES: Standard, Movie, Music, Sport, Game, Portable Audio modes; voice level selector; AAV (advanced auto volume); ClearAudio+; subwoofer level; night mode; wall mounting option; wireless sub; Bluetooth; NFC; 3D and 4K/60p passthrough; display brightness control; SongPal app control

HCC VERDICT

Sony HT-CT770

→ £400 Approx → www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 020 7365 2413

HIGHS: Hi-res Blu-ray audio decoding; good connectivity; easy to use; powerful sound; Bluetooth app control

LOWS: Music performance lacks polish; non-backlit remote; sound deteriorates at loud volumes; dialogue could be clearer

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Pioneer SBX-N500

£250 gets you this single-enclosure audio offering with welcome DLNA functionality



PIONEER'S SBX-N500 IS more ambitious than most soundbars, blessed with multimedia talents many rivals ignore. Courtesy of its built-in Wi-Fi and DLNA certification, you can stream music from PCs and NAS drives, with a YouTube portal thrown in for good measure. There's also Bluetooth, Wi-Fi Direct and Miracast support.

An unfussy black and grey colour scheme makes it a low-key companion for your TV. You can wall-mount it, but it's better suited to tabletop placement. If it blocks your TV's IR receiver there's a built-in repeater. On the back, the SBX-N500 sports a lone ARC-compatible HDMI output, letting you view the Pioneer's menus and YouTube vids on your display.

There are no HDMI inputs, but there are two optical digital ins, alongside Ethernet for wired web connection. On a network, the Pioneer plays ball with MP3, WMA, WAV, MP4 and JPEG files among others. Slam a USB drive into the port and you can add FLAC to the list. Mobile devices can also be hooked up to the 3.5mm input; and on the Bluetooth side, the 'bar is equipped with a transmitter, sending audio to headphones and speakers.

The twin 3in woofers and two 2.5in full-range drivers deliver a weighty, vibrant sound, with sparkly highs, a feisty (if occasionally wild) midrange and bass by the bucketload. It has no trouble filling a modest room, giving movie soundtracks impressive

scale. With *Pacific Rim* on Blu-ray, battles between monsters and robots arrive with convincing heft – although pushed too high the built-in woofers can sound boomy, and even after EQ tweaking bass notes aren't particularly tight or nimble. But bass issues aside, the SBX-N500 is good value – loud and energetic, with crisp treble and forthright dialogue.

HCC VERDICT

Pioneer SBX-N500 → £250

Overall ★★★★★

£1,200 → www.focal.com

Focal Dimension/Sub

The French audio marque creates quite a stir with its first foray into the soundbar market

FOCAL IS KNOWN in hi-fi circles for creating lush high-end floorstanders, and it brings some of that audiophile sensibility to your TV with the Dimension soundbar and soundbase-style Sub subwoofer. You can get the former on its own, but opt for both for a knockout aural experience – particularly as the pair fit snugly together.

The 'bar employs five identical ultra-flat full-range drivers, and phase and delay processing to deliver a faux surround effect from the L/R channels. Amplification is 6 x 75W, with the sixth channel driving the sub. Connectivity includes a single HDMI input and ARC output, plus optical and 3.5mm. Bluetooth is an extra via an adaptor.

So a little stingy on the features front (there's no USB playback, either) but the Dimension delivers where it counts. Firstly,

it's capable of reaching prodigious volumes – you're unlikely to ever get near its max setting. Yet dialogue remains utterly intelligible and bass, once properly adjusted, is meaty, tight and fast. The duo lives up to its name, too, with a three-dimensional soundscape that will place you in the middle of a movie mix. With *Rush* on Blu-ray, that equates to being trackside, enveloped by throaty engine roars and the rumble of thunder. Music delivery is on the clinical side, but there's no arguing with the sheer energy and clarity imparted throughout the frequency range. Premium price, yes, but a premium performance to boot.



HCC VERDICT

Focal Dimension/Sub → £1,200

Overall ★★★★★



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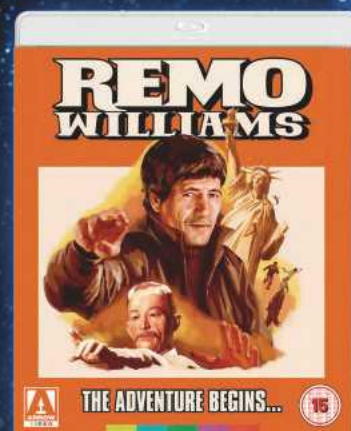
15TH SEP



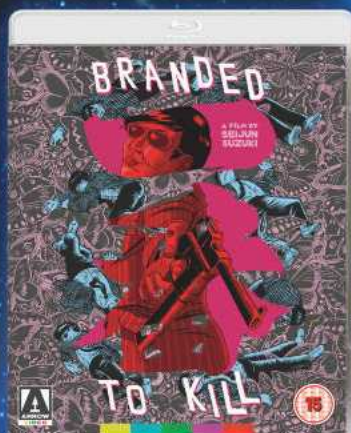
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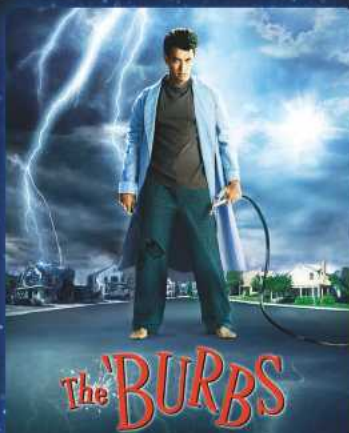
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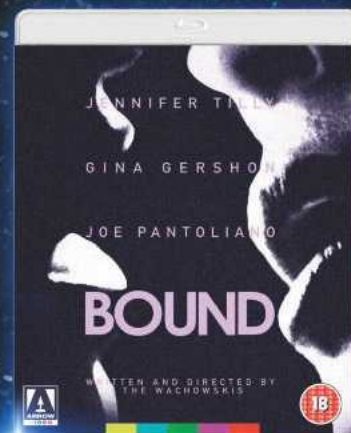
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Panasonic SC-HTB880

This HDMI-equipped soundbar cuts a stylish figure on your AV furniture, but **Adrian Justins** isn't sure it offers the potent performance to match



The Panasonic is geared up to deliver 5.1 sound, with Dolby Virtual Speaker provided to circumnavigate

the issue of all speakers being in front of you. Operation is fairly straightforward, effected by using the touch-sensitive controls on the right sidepanel or, more likely, the nicely designed remote control. User options include 3D surround, Clear-mode dialogue and six general DSP sound modes. You can tweak the subwoofer level and dialogue level but not normal treble or bass levels.

PANASONIC'S SOLUTION TO the problem of squeezing a soundbar in front of your low-slung flatscreen is called Delta Form Design. The SC-HTB880's triangular cross section means larger drive units can be accommodated than with a rectangular model. An IR blaster is provided should the 51mm-high 'bar still block your TV's IR sensor.

The 250W wireless subwoofer is complemented by five channels in the main unit, each powered to the tune of 50W. Socketry is good, with dual HDMI inputs and one ARC-enabled output (able to passthrough 3D and 4K/60p signals, should you have any) joined by optical digital audio. However, Dolby Digital and DTS decoding does not include hi-res, the USB is only for servicing and a 3.5mm analogue line-in is absent. Wireless connectivity is also offered with apt-X CD-quality Bluetooth streaming and contactless NFC pairing.

With its steel mesh finish and rounded edges the SC-HTB880 is certainly stylish, and there's a neat scrolling LCD display behind the grille. The problem is the incline makes it hard to read when sitting at sofa-height opposite the 'bar (it's better aligned for mounting vertically on a wall).

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Five-channel
soundbar/sub duo

POSITION:
Panasonic's
top-flight soundbar

PEERS:
Samsung HW-H750;
Sony HT-ST7;
Sonos Playbar

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2.5in bass-reflex woofers; 2 x 1in semi-dome tweeters; 1 x 2.5in full-range cone

AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): 250W

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI output (ARC); optical digital audio; USB (service port); IR blaster

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: Yes. 250W, 6.5in driver

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 1,125(w) x 51(h) x 121(d)mm

WEIGHT: 3.1kg

FEATURES: Wireless subwoofer; second-generation LincD-Amp; Dolby Digital; DTS; Dolby Pro-Logic II; Dolby Virtual Speaker; Clear-mode dialogue; 6 x DSP modes (Standard, Stadium, Music, Cinema, News, Stereo); Dialogue level control; Delta Form Design; wall-mountable; 4K/60p passthrough; 3D passthrough; Bluetooth wireless technology; Panasonic Android Music Streaming App; One-Touch Connection (NFC)

A mixed bag

In use, this soundbar/subwoofer combi delivers some unexpectedly odd results. Generally, dialogue is best suited to its maximum level, including with game shows on Sky connected via ARC; voices can sound harsh, even in Standard mode. My solution was to choose Stereo mode and increase the bass to redress the wispieness of the higher frequencies.

The treble harshness can also be heard with Blu-rays. When the flying fish bombard the boat in *Life of Pi*, it's not just the vessel and occupants who get a battering. But bass is also an issue, seemingly poorly integrated. During the fiery crash in *Rush* the low frequencies pulse uncomfortably, and during the explosions during *The Dark Knight Rises* when Bane blows up the football stadium, the 'bar literally shakes with anger.

Oddly, the B880's love of higher frequencies pays dividends when it comes to streaming music from a laptop using apt-X Bluetooth. Indeed, the whole setup is much more conducive to music. The massively over-egged bass in Lorde's *Royals* often needs careful handling, yet the sub manages to pull it off (albeit on its lowest setting) and the vocals sound well projected.

So, while the SC-HTB880 seems well equipped for listening to music, as a home cinema tool it's rather unruly

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic SC-HTB880

→ £600 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk
→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Attractive design; impressive volume levels; decent connections; musical performance

LOWS: Heavy bass causes vibration; sibilant vocals; tricky-to-read display because of angle; no USB file playback

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Philips HTL9100

This ingenious soundbar/subwoofer pairing brings genuine 5.1 sound

BATTERY POWERED SPEAKERS aren't often found in a home cinema environment, because they require charging and lack real grunt, but Philips employs them here to provide *bona fide* discrete multichannel audio.

The HTL9100 is a neat idea. A soundbar and subwoofer (the latter connecting wirelessly), it can be run in a regular 2.1 configuration. Yet remove the cabinets at either end of the soundbar (they click in and out of place) and their internal Lithium cells kick into action and you have truly wireless speakers that you can plonk in the surround position. Just remember to reattach them later, as it's when they are housed that the batteries are charged.

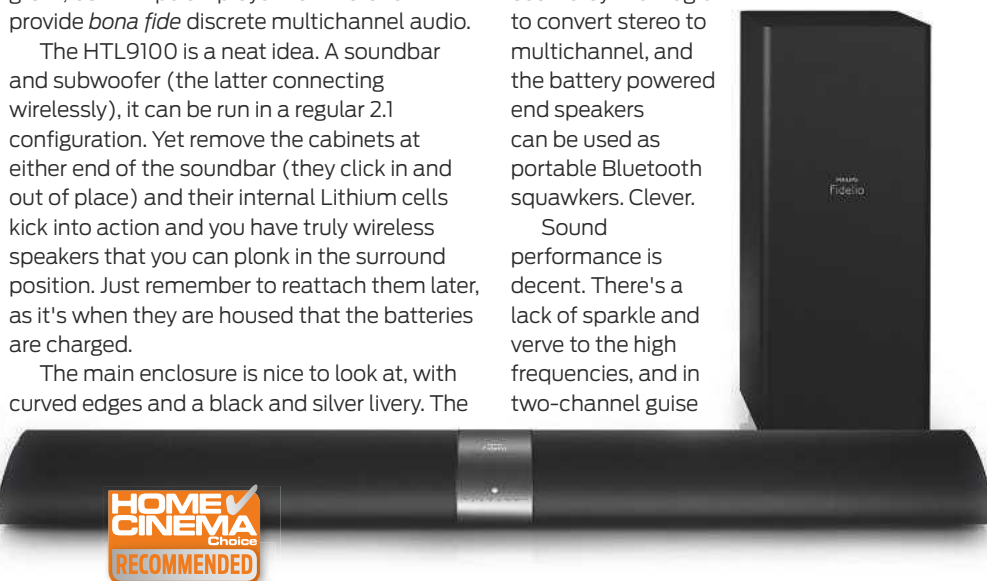
The main enclosure is nice to look at, with curved edges and a black and silver livery. The

subwoofer is more utilitarian. Hookups include dual HDMI inputs, one ARC output, and Bluetooth for music streaming – for the latter, use Dolby Pro-Logic to convert stereo to multichannel, and the battery powered end speakers can be used as portable Bluetooth squawkers. Clever.

Sound performance is decent. There's a lack of sparkle and verve to the high frequencies, and in two-channel guise

the stereo spread is a bit narrow, but film and TV material is cleanly presented with dollops of tight, weighty bass, and it reaches volumes your TV can only dream of. User EQ runs to just bass and treble adjustments.

And the real thrill comes via the multichannel mode – while the surround enclosures are reliant on a single 2.5in driver each, and only rudimentary amplification, they certainly help craft an immersive soundfield, with authentic pans and background effects when the material offers it. Not as impressive as a separates-based solution, but definitely enjoyable.



HCC VERDICT

Philips HTL9100 → £600

Overall ★★★★★

Conclusion

HERE WE'VE COVERED soundbars and soundbases ranging from £180 to £1,200, showing exactly how varied the pimp-your-TV-speaker category has become in a short space of time. There are some standout performers, but all of them have their merits.

Even the Panasonic SC-HTB880, which suffers from a relatively high price tag and wild bass response, can claim a sleek design and real room-filling presence, and the Sonos Playbar, which looks overpriced and poorly connected at first glance, is probably an essential purchase for those who have already bought into the music streaming giant's eco-system.

Humax's STE-1000BSW is a fine example of an affordable soundbar. The sub-£200 asking price is easy to swallow, and its slender design makes it a good option for a room where space and décor are a concern.

The three soundbases (from Focal, Tannoy and Canton) also cater for tidy installations, and all utilise their extra enclosure space to pack potent drivers and amplification. Of the

three, Canton's DM 50 is perhaps the pick, based on its performance-to-price ratio.

If you're more inclined towards a traditional soundbar, it becomes a matter of deciding what features and connections you really need. Pioneer's SBX-N500 brings DLNA streaming but misses out on HDMI inputs; Sony's CT-770 is a good option if you can live without the USB playback of the Samsung HW-H750 and its brand-specific connective tricks – although the more expensive Samsung is a better performer. Philips' HTL9100 is unique in that it caters for surround fans, but you may decide you'd rather save some money and stick to a stereo option like Q Acoustics' Media 4 (pictured). This doesn't necessarily look pretty, but it sounds pretty good ■



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PUPPET MASTERS

The Muppets are ...Most Wanted on Blu-ray, see p97



Behind the curve?

Samsung's 65in H8000 TV sports a fashionable curved design but an unfashionable Full HD pixel count. **Adrian Justins** wonders if his hard-earned money is best spent elsewhere

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
65in Full HD curved TV

POSITION:
Samsung's flagship Full HD model

PEERS:
Sony KDL-65W955; LG 65LB730V

Samsung's H8000 is bundled with a cute pebble-style handset

YOU CAN'T START any TV screen review these days without mentioning the F-word, 4K. And although the UE65H8000 only sports a resolution of 1,920 x 1,080, it's still necessary to approach it from a 4K perspective. Partly because it is a whopping 65in model, and partly because its price of £3,000 puts it firmly in UHD territory.

The UE65H8000 is also curved. In some ways it seems illogical for Samsung to make a curved screen of this size with an inferior resolution. At £4,000 for the 4K 65HU8500 I'd have thought most potential H8000 customers would want to find the extra notes for the additional 6,220,800 pixels on offer – or go for cheaper, rival 4K screens. That is after all, the main difference between the sets.

There are some less significant ones, of course, such as the lack of a built-in camera on this Full HD model, 40W of audio power vs 60W on its 4K stablemate, and, in terms of design, integrated connections rather than the external box of the HU8500.

But with the situation surrounding the compatibility of 4K screens with (potential) 4K sources a bit of a mess, consumers may have been put off buying a 4K screen until issues of copy protection and format compatibility are well and truly resolved. But they might still want some curves...

Top of the Full HD pops

The 65H8000 is Samsung's top-flight Full HD model and is also available in 55in and 48in



guises. The stand and metallic bezel are suitably strong-looking but one problem TV designers face is that the bigger the screen the harder it is to make the frame work. Everyone wants as thin a bezel as possible, but then you end up with a huge expanse of black screen and nothing to offset it. Great when the set is on but when in standby it's rather immense and boring.

The jack pack contains no nasty surprises, with plenty of HDMI, audio-only and legacy options. As far as Smartness goes, the 65H8000 features a Quad Core Plus processor that enables you to switch between

'With the right content the screen can look amazing. With 3D Blu-rays crosstalk is virtually non-existent'

apps and navigate the menu faster than Usain Bolt dashing for a bus. It also boasts voice and gesture control and a secondary remote with a touchpad and pointer tool. None of these gimmicky control methods are outright successes. Happily, the TV can be operated in the conventional manner using the normal remote control.

The GUI looks perfectly pleasant and is more or less logically structured but accessing many of the settings is sometimes a faff. For example, Motion Plus, which controls judder and blur reduction, is buried in a sub-folder of the Picture menu.

Calibration options, like the Smart TV app selections, are bountiful and flexible, including 2pt and 10pt white balance, colour space options (custom RGB, native, auto) and gamma. Others worthy of experimentation include Dynamic Contrast and Cinema Black (the latter kills the backlight when watching material with black bars top and bottom).

As well as the curve, this screen aims to entice with its 1,000Hz CMR panel and LED array, which features Micro Dimming Ultimate. This breaks the picture down into 1,152 separate blocks when deciding how much brightness to deliver. Auto Depth Enhancer, meanwhile applies different levels of contrast enhancement to different areas of the screen, again as part of the curve thing.

The curve has a profound affect on the shape of the image that is seen by anyone sitting off to the side. You end up focusing on the opposite end of the screen because the nearer end faces away from you, and overall the screen takes on a twisted appearance. Essentially, off-axis viewing simply doesn't stack up with a curved model. On the other hand, when sitting directly opposite, the curve really pays dividends in terms of immersion.

You're not conscious of the fact you're looking at a curve, but it just feels right, and with the right content the screen can look amazing, including Full HD 3D Blu-rays such as animation movie *Epic*. Everything about the perspective, resolution, depth of field, clarity and colour fidelity impresses. Crosstalk is virtually non-existent and shadow detail in the scene where MK is chased and caught in Prof Bomba's lab is a riot, with lots of curiosities and equipment lurking in the gloomy shadows.

The active 3D specs are light and comfy (two pairs are supplied) but 3D still has its flaws (*Life of Pi* looks worryingly flat at times) and the Samsung drops the ball with side-by-side broadcast 3D. The drop in resolution at this scale is clearly noticeable, and crosstalk double-imaging is a concern.

Open the toolbox

The same inconsistency applies to the TV's 2D performance, but you can improve certain problems if they arise using the screen's litany of picture processing tools. I was impressed by the screen's handling of *Sideways* on DVD, which looked reasonably detailed for a standard-def flick. Scenes with amorphous areas such as cloudy skies that appeared to suffer from MPEG noise scrubbed up beautifully using Samsung's Digital Clean View tool. Talking of clouds: LED leakage is quite prominent in four patches at each corner, and this sometimes leads to inferior contrast levels. If the action is fast-moving it's barely a concern, though.

Colour fidelity, while not as natural-seeming as a plasma, is more than decent. Skin tones look accurate; Walter's jowls are ruddy and Donny looks pale in *The Big Lebowski* on Blu-ray, while Jesus Quintana's purple bowling suit looks muted and not overly garish.

During the recent World Cup final I compared the live broadcast in standard-def and HD. SD proved an unwatchable mush at this size, as if vaseline had been smeared over the screen. Hi-def was a vast improvement, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that I should've been watching in upscaled 4K, considering the price and size of the display.

The 65H8000's sonics are no match for the screen's size, either. Mid and high frequencies are reasonable, with dialogue acceptable for TV broadcasts, but with movies the screen desperately needs more power and a boost to its low-end response.

Overall, the UE65H8000 is a highly versatile TV capable of delivering first-rate 1080p images, a few clouding issues excepted. However, its curve is both good and bad – on-axis viewing has extra charm, but viewing angles are more critical than with a regular flat screen. A bigger concern is that price tag. Samsung's Full HD range-topper faces tough competition from 3,840 x 2,160 rivals. Should you purchase? That's your choice ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Samsung offers many Smart tricks, including the option of browsing the net while keeping one eye on what you're watching...

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active (two pairs of glasses supplied)
4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: 2 x Freeview HD; 2 x Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; component video; composite video; RGB Scart; Ethernet; stereo analogue audio; satellite RF x 2; terrestrial RF; digital optical audio; headphones socket; built-in Wi-Fi

SOUND: 40W audio (2 x 10W, plus 20W woofer)

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,451(w) x 838(h) x 107(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 24kg

FEATURES: Ultra Clear panel; 1,000Hz CMR; Micro Dimming Ultimate; 3D HyperReal Engine; Mega Contrast; Quad Core+ processor; USB and DLNA multimedia playback (AVCHD, AVI, XVID, DIVX, MPG, MP4, MKV, MOV, WMV, JPEG, FLAC, MP3, M4A); DLNA Allshare; web browser; Skype; voice and gesture control (optional camera required); dual remotes; USB PVR recording; Wi-Fi Direct; Football Mode; multiscreen mode; Picture-in-Picture; screen mirroring

HCC VERDICT



Samsung UE65H8000

→ £3,000 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
→ Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Excellent Smart TV selection; impressive pictures with good sources; good connectivity
LOWES: Gimmicky Football Mode; LED leakage noticeable; average audio; too costly compared with 4K screens

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Something in the Air

Monitor Audio's A100 network amp majors on Apple AirPlay connectivity (but not Bluetooth) – although **Adrian Justins** is more interested in its optical audio input...

OVER THE YEARS, Monitor Audio has dipped its toes in the active desktop speaker and speaker-dock markets with variable levels of success. Now the company is giving the electronics business another go with this remarkable-looking integrated amplifier/network streamer.

Although unequipped to deliver surround sound, the A100 makes a cunning alternative to a soundbar. Endowed with a living-room friendly design and form factor – and an all-important optical digital audio input – you can site it next to your flatscreen and then plumb in the speakers of your choice to banana plug-compatible terminals. The result is a flexible, and more genuine stereo performance, than a regular 'bar.

In addition to this, the A100 is Apple AirPlay and DLNA certified. And it will play ball with hi-res audio, although unfortunately, given the plethora of formats, hi-res audio sometimes feels harder to fathom than Einstein's theory of relativity written in hieroglyphics; when using AirPlay from an iOS device the maximum resolution is 16-bit/44.1kHz and hi-res ALAC files are downsampled, yet when using AirPlay to stream from a desktop or laptop running OSX you can enjoy full-on 24-bit/192kHz ALAC files. Also, DLNA provides a means of enjoying hi-res files, and the A100 will

automatically select a DLNA streaming source unless an AirPlay source is already playing (AirPlay will always over-ride DLNA).

Build quality is high, with a rigid polymer and die-cast aluminium chassis. The latter also acts as a heat sink to help

dissipate the heat from the 50W-per-channel hi-fi-grade Class A/B amp.

Operating the A100 is mostly simple, but not flawless – it takes too long to power up, you hear clicks when changing TV channels and the remote control has no mute button. This is annoying when using the unit with a TV as the screen's remote doesn't control sound volume when the optical output is chosen. The iOS app is slow to connect and prone to instability.

Lush delivery

Give it about 20 minutes to warm up and the A100 shows what it's capable of. Using a pair of decent monitor speakers (Q Acoustics' Q7000), I was treated to lush sonics, especially with CDs and hi-res streams. Bass that can feel vague and wishy-washy on inferior integrated systems was detailed and refined, blending perfectly with midband vocals.

An ability to retain the integrity of the soundstage as the decibels ascend translates to a highly satisfying performance with movies. The lack of a centre channel and surround sound decoding does limit the immersion, but cacophonous soundtracks such as *Band of Brothers* on BD have chandelier-rattling power and authority. Broadcast TV, meanwhile, benefits from the warmth of having an analogue amplification stage.

Overall, despite a few niggles, it's hard not to like the A100 ■



The A100 is stylish and well built

SPECIFICATIONS

AMPLIFICATION: 100W

CONNECTIONS: Optical digital audio input; stereo phono input; USB; speaker terminals; subwoofer output

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 326(w) x 55(h) x 204(d)mm

WEIGHT: 1.9kg

FEATURES: AirPlay (Mac, iOS, PC); USB playback (iOS only); DLNA network; Airstream Direct; iOS/Android app; MP3, WMA, AAC, Ogg Vorbis, FLAC, ALAC, LPCM file support; vertical or horizontal orientation (stand included); connection to Wi-Fi network using Wi-Fi sharing; Class A/B amplifiers

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Style-heavy networkable stereo amp

POSITION:

Part of MA's Airstream range

PEERS:

Cambridge Audio Minx XI

HCC VERDICT

Monitor Audio A100

→£400 → www.monitoraudio.co.uk

→ Tel: 01268 740580

HIGHS: Cool styling; terrific power and sonic clarity; hi-res streaming

LOWS: Slow to power up; unstable iOS app; no mute button on remote; somewhat expensive

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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So, who needs 4K anyway?

John Archer looks past the JVC DLA-X700R's 'is it 4K or isn't it?' confusion and discovers a true movie star fit for a dedicated home theatre

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Full HD D-ILA PJ
with 3D playback
and e-Shift 4K

POSITION:
Between the X500R
and the X900R

PEERS:
JVC DLA-X500R;
Sony VPL-
VW500ES

IT WOULD BE easy to be cynical about JVC's DLA-X700R. After all, a projector that claims a 3,840 x 2,160 resolution and which can take in native 4K source images yet isn't actually a 4K projector could be seen to be deliberately exploiting the confusions littering the nascent 4K marketplace.

It doesn't help, either, that the X700R's £7,300 asking price positions it perilously closely to a genuine, 4K-in-4K-out PJ: Sony's astonishing £8,800 VPL-VW500ES. However, after spending two weeks with the X700R the only thing I care about is stopping JVC from ever having it back...

D-ILA déjà vu

The X700R looks exactly like last year's JVC D-ILA projectors: a squat, fairly unglamorous black rectangle with a large lens in the centre of the front edge and venting ports down either side. And, as last

year's models looked near identical to their predecessors, I can only assume the JVC staffer in charge of product styling is taking the world's longest holiday.

Emblazoned on the top are THX and ISF logos. The first signifies that the projector has passed the performance tests of the THX quality assurance group, while the latter indicates that the X700R carries enough calibration flexibility to support a pro installation by a trained ISF engineer.

In the X700R's case, the calibration suite is exceptional, including a startlingly fulsome colour management system; gamma management; 10 'lens memory' slots for storing zoom and focus settings for different movie aspect ratios; white balance management; and welcome control over JVC's e-Shift 4K system.

Ah yes, e-Shift 4K. This is the X700R's '4K' technology, putting two HD chipsets in line



Another well-designed
backlit zapper from JVC

with one offset diagonally by half a pixel so that the image passed through them ends up being made from four times as many pixels. The X700R can also take in native 4K source feeds (up to 60p at 4:2:0 colour resolution). But here's the kicker: the projector has to downscale native 4K feeds to HD before passing them through the e-Shift 4K optics. So what you ultimately get out of the X700R is a native HD image with UHD pixel density.

Such density is certainly useful with the really large images you can get from a projector, as it should help them look brighter and smoother, and less prone to jagged edges. But it's not genuine 4K.

Upping the contrast ante

If you read our ecstatic review of JVC's X500R projector, you might be wondering why it's worth finding £2,300 more for this model. But there are some key differences. The X700R offers much more comprehensive installation

'The X700R's pictures do look sharper – or at least denser – than they would on a normal HD projector'

options, doubles the number of lens memory slots, and – most significantly – offers double the contrast ratio.

In fact, the X700R's simply jaw-dropping 120,000:1 native contrast – as in, not dependent on a dynamic contrast system – has much more to do with why I love it than any e-Shift 4K shenanigans. And this contrast ratio rises to a claimed 1,200,000:1 if you activate JVC's new Intelligent Lens Aperture dynamic contrast feature.

The fact is, though, that the X700R doesn't need any help from a dynamic aperture. In fact, all this did while watching the many night scenes in the engagingly rubbish *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* was add some unwelcome brightness instability in return for only a tiny bit more image dynamism. Turn it off and you've still got quite the best black levels I've ever seen on any projector.

Even the darkest vampire-hiding corner is delivered without any of the tell-tale greyish pall that characterises low-contrast displays. Yet within the very same frame you'll see lamps and moons and other bright elements looking gorgeously light and punchy. There's no sense of bright elements being muted during dark scenes, something which is always a concern with rival video-chuckers that depend on dynamic apertures.

Also exhilarating is the amount of shadow detail the X700R retains during murkier moments, ensuring that they are conveyed just

as deep and detailed as bright ones. This makes for a fantastically immersive viewing experience.

The X700R only claims 1,300 Lumens of brightness, a figure that's hardly likely to impress specifications freaks, and one that makes it not an ideal partner for a well-lit environment. Yet its classy contrast talent means that images still appear bright and vibrant, and its beautifully inky black colours provide an excellent foundation for the rest of the colour palette. *Abraham Lincoln...*'s daytime scenes are replete with believable colour tones, and these lose zero punch or naturalism in dimly-lit interiors; the projector perfectly handles the differences between the human and vampire skin tones during the train attack.

A side-by-side run-through of some 4K demo footage did confirm that the X700R's e-Shift 4K system is no match for the spectacular resolution of Sony's true 4K VPL-VW500ES. But the X700R's pictures do look sharper – or at least denser – than they would on a normal HD projector, removing any jaggedness around the often stark outlines of the characters against the muted backdrops throughout my Presidential undead-slaying reference Blu-ray. The extra pixel density additionally creates a more 'analogue' feeling to the image than normal HD projectors, leaving you feeling like you're watching celluloid rather than, well... a bunch of pixels.

There's a small loss of detail over Abe's arms as he swings his axe around, as well as over other areas of rapid motion. But this isn't a big enough deal to justify activating the projector's rather over-eager Clear Motion processing system.

Last year's JVC projector models all struggled with the third dimension. However, the company has introduced a new 3D driving system this year that, as far as I can see, completely removes crosstalk from the X700R's 3D efforts. This leaves the pristine 3D Blu-ray of *Oz The Great and Powerful* looking detailed, dense, realistic and full of depth. There's not much reduction in colour vibrancy and brightness during 3D either, despite the dimming effect of the shuttering glasses.

More than a matter of pixels

When I started using the DLA-X700R I expected it to struggle against Sony's VPL-VW500ES native 4K projector. Yet while it doesn't deliver a true 4K detail experience like the Sony, its superiority in the contrast and black level departments means that some movie fans will feel it ultimately delivers the more cinematic image. In that regard it's ever so easy to recommend. What might give you pause for thought is that JVC will have announced a new product line before the year is out. Could this see the brand finally embracing genuine 4K? It remains tight-lipped... ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter system (two pairs of glasses supplied)
4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080, but with e-Shift 4K
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI inputs; RS-232 port for provided 3D sync dongle; 12V trigger; Ethernet port
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,300 ANSI Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 120,000:1 native; 1,200,000:1 dynamic
DIMENSIONS: 455(w) x 179(h) x 472(d)mm
WEIGHT: 15kg
FEATURES: e-Shift 4K; new 3D driving technology; 2D-3D conversion; colour management; gamma management; Intelligent Lens Aperture; automatic lens cover; vertical digital keystone correction; Clear Black mode; 10 lens memories; Clear Motion Drive; THX and ISF certification; 21dB running noise in low-lamp mode; 4K signal input

HCC VERDICT



JVC DLA-X700R

→ £7,300 approx → www.jvc.co.uk
 → Tel: 0845 310 8000

HIGHS: Probably the best black levels available at a vaguely sensible price; gorgeously sharp, natural images; runs quietly; calibration chops
LOWS: Minor motion resolution loss; it's not truly 4K; it's not cheap either; cumbersome chassis

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

A £120 flagship BD player!

Toshiba's BDX5500 proves how mass market the format has become, says **Danny Phillips**

WITH HORDES OF budget Blu-ray decks on the market, new models need something special to catch the eye. For Toshiba's top-end player, that something is a design that's perfect for squeezing into narrow spaces. It's a surprisingly well-made and stylish player, encased in a compact square box with curved corners and a brushed silver top panel.

A disc slot and touch controls adorn the front.

Connections include HDMI, Ethernet, coaxial digital and USB for media playback. Built-in Wi-Fi lets you access BBC iPlayer, Netflix, YouTube, Dailymotion, BBC News, BBC Sport, Picasa, Facebook and Funspot. A decent selection, but it still plays second fiddle to the likes of Samsung and LG.

You can also stream files via DLNA (but don't expect FLAC support) and the feature



Toshiba's deck wins out in the style stakes

Navigation is a tad sluggish at times and disc loading isn't the quickest. However, play a Blu-ray and the Toshiba delivers excellent picture quality, with solid detail, smooth tonal blends and efficient motion tracking. That goes for 3D discs, too. All of which makes the BDX5500 an impressive deck, but a lack of slickness and VOD content means Samsung and LG's players are a better buy ■

list is enhanced by 4K upscaling, 3D playback and Miracast. This is the only Toshiba deck with these features.

Onscreen presentation is muddled, with two separate home menus covering similar ground, but the 'Portal' menu offers crisp HD graphics and icons. DLNA and setup menus are less inspiring but functional enough.

HCC VERDICT

Toshiba BDX5500 → £120

Overall ★★★★★

MANHATTAN PLAZA HD-T2 → Approx £50

Freeview HD with a touch of Smart

Apps including YouTube help this affordable set-top box stand out, reckons **Grant Rennell**

NON-RECORDING FREEVIEW HD boxes aren't exactly sexy but can serve a purpose with a legacy TV, and the Plaza HD-T2 also comes with tempting apps.

This (not especially) little black box sports HDMI, Scart and composite video outputs, coaxial audio and stereo phono audio outputs, an aerial loopthrough, an Ethernet port (there's no Wi-Fi, sadly) and a USB port solely for applying software updates. The plasticky remote is easy to get to grips

with, and sports a dedicated button for a YouTube app.

Manhattan's user interface is very accessible. An attractive full-screen EPG can show certain types of channel such as radio, HD or those in a favourites list and be used to set reminders. A 'browsing bar' displays now-and-next programme info.

Apps include BBC iPlayer and the aforementioned YouTube. The latter supports one-touch streaming from an Android device, with search and sorting functionality and HD streaming. Other apps

are BBC Sport and BBC News, plus VuTV, the SD streaming PayTV service which includes Comedy Central, History and MTV. A code for a

free month's viewing is included, after that it will cost you £7 per month. Manhattan suggests a minimum 3Mbps connection for content streaming.

Hi-def and good-quality standard-def Freeview TV looked superb on my TV when output over HDMI; even RGB Scart pictures impressed, although fuzziness was evident using the composite output. Video streamed smoothly from the apps, with the exception of some jerkiness when scrolling through the BBC Sport offering.

If you have a non-Freeview display in the house, the Plaza HD-T2 is worth picking up ■



The Plaza HD-T2 offers a customisable EPG

HCC VERDICT

Manhattan Plaza HD-T2 → £50

Overall ★★★★★

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Flatscreen roundup 32in TVs

John Archer outlines the reasons why these relatively small HD TVs are still selling like hot cakes, and auditions a quartet of challengers that range in price from £180 to £400. Do you always get what you pay for? Read on...

IT'S EASY TO get caught up in the push for ever larger TV screen sizes and forget that the relatively humble 32in screen is still extremely popular, because some people are still upgrading from their 28in CRT TV. Shocking isn't it? Yet even for those with a more up-to-date AV attitude, 32in TVs can remain a compelling proposition for a trio of reasons.

Second room screens

First, they're often a great size for a second room where, say, a 50in display is will often be impractical. In fact, many brands now only start their TV ranges at 32in rather than going smaller, making it clear just how established the size has become as households' second TV of choice. Put another way, if you're looking for a TV to grace your kitchen,

you'll struggle to find anything smaller.

Second, a growing number of 32in TVs – including all the models featured in this group test – carry Smart features such as catch-up TV viewing and home networking.

'The 32in TV market is so competitive we've started to see a real upsurge in features and performance'

Pepper your house with a few of these sets and you'll be able to stream media to wherever you are.

And third? 32in TVs tend to be very affordable, in recognition of the fact that consumers are increasingly seeing these relatively small screens as essentially utility devices, where functionality and affordability are potentially more important than picture and sound quality.

That said, the 32in TV market is so competitive that we've started to see a real upsurge in performance standards in recent times as brands try to get that all-important edge. Which is why the time is right to round up four 32in TVs to see just how good – or otherwise – the minnows of the TV world have really become.

Today's 32in screens often feature the same svelte designs of their bigger brothers



Approx £180 → www.finluxdirect.com

Finlux 32F8072-T

This ultra-affordable set from the direct retailer offers some VOD, but has picture problems, too



THE FINLUX 32F8072-T really does only cost £180 – despite the fact that it's a Full HD 32in TV complete with a Freeview HD tuner and Smart functionality. Those Smart features are somewhat limited, with useful streaming services running just to BBC iPlayer, Netflix and YouTube. But there's Skype, Facebook and Twitter support, too, and it's remarkable that there are any such features at all on this bargain set.

The 32F8072-T rather lives down to its price point with its build quality, which is lightweight and flimsy. The design is fairly perfunctory, too, aside from the bezel, which is engagingly slim. It carries three HDMI and two USBs, though, which is a good turn out, and can play files from networked DLNA devices as well as the internet.

The 32F8072-T produces comfortably the weakest pictures in this group test. The main reason for this is that its black levels are well below average, leaving dark *American Hustle* sequences, such as the scene outside the nightclub after partying with Mayor Polito (Jeremy Renner), looking washed out, flat, low on detail and unnaturally coloured. To make matters worse you're also distracted during dark scenes by some fairly strong backlight clouding inconsistencies.

More of a bright pupil

The picture's appeal shifts up a few gears with bright sequences. When Rosenfeld (Christian Bale) chases Polito after his hotel room bolt, colours appear more believable, and you start to appreciate other strengths like decent detailing and relatively little blurring over motion.

As for audio, the 32F8072-T speakers are underpowered, leaving everything but the most bare-bones of soundtracks coming across as thin.

So if the likes of *This Morning* are all you like to watch then I guess you could consider the 32F8072-T, but its AV shortcomings make it a bit of a bust to movie fans like us.

HCC VERDICT

Finlux 32F807-T → £180

Overall ★★★★★

Approx £300 → www.panasonic.co.uk

Panasonic TX-32AS500

A glamorous-looking screen with plenty of appeal, despite the 1,366 x 768 resolution



THE 32AS500 IMMEDIATELY catches your eye with its glossy super-slim bezel and striking, open-framed stand.

Things are a bit disappointing around the back, though, with only two HDMI's and a single USB when I'd have liked one more of each. The set does, however, support wireless multimedia streaming from networked DLNA devices and access to Panasonic's Smart online platform.

The latter is built around Panasonic's inspired My Home Screen interface, whereby you access content via a series of completely personalisable onscreen hubs. But note that it's essentially last year's engine; the new Freetime catch up TV, TV Anywhere or My Stream features of higher-end 2014 Panasonic screens are absent.

The panel inside the 32AS500 is HD Ready 1,366 x 768 rather than Full HD, but it is equipped with 100Hz backlight blinking tech to improve motion resolution.

The 32AS500's performance is okay considering the price. Colours are warm and natural, and motion is handled fairly well in that the amount of resolution lost over moving objects is seldom severe enough to distract. The TV supports a wider viewing angle before losing colour and contrast than any of its rivals here, and the 2 x 5W speaker array ushers in pleasingly open and clear audio if kept to sensible volumes.

Hi-def pictures aren't the sharpest on test, but they still look HD and the slight softness is matched by a lack of noise. However, the 32AS500 does have one definite weakness: an indifferent contrast performance. That night scene outside the club in *American Hustle* appears through a grey mist that can't be removed without taking the

backlight setting so low that pictures lose punch and brightness. There's also a hollow look to dark picture areas as details are crushed out of the shadows. Adaptive Backlight Control can improve black level response, but causes irksome brightness jumps.

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TX-32AS500 → £300

Overall ★★★★★

Approx £400 → www.samsung.co.uk

Samsung UE32H6200

This Full HD (and 3D) TV aims for the higher-end of the 32in market



THE UE32H6200 IS the most expensive TV in this roundup – and it looks it. From its shiny metallic 'cross-style' tabletop stand, through to its glassy black bezel and the gentle downward curve of its bottom edge, it makes a classy first impression.

It's very well connected too, with three HDMI's for digital hookup plus DLNA network support and a trio of USB's for multimedia playback. Plus, of course, the UE32H6200 can go online through Samsung's Smart TV system. This hasn't improved as much as I wanted from its 2013 iteration, but nonetheless impresses thanks to both the presentation of its interface and the huge amount of content available, including apps for all the main UK catch up TV services plus both Netflix and Amazon Instant.

Accomplished Full HD

Pictures come via an edge LED system, a Full HD Active 3D panel, and a 200Hz engine for sharpening up motion. And they're very good.

Colours in particular are streets ahead of those of the Finlux (and others, actually), with natural tones that hold up during both bright and dark scenes, and infinitely subtle colour blends. *My Rush* and *American Hustle* Blu-rays both look stunningly detailed and sharp too, and this sharpness is generally retained courtesy of the best motion processing system in this roundup.

Samsung's UE32H6200 doesn't initially look too hot with its black levels – but you can improve the black response considerably by simply reducing the backlight to around its 8 setting for dark-room movie viewing. Yet even after this adjustment the panel doesn't achieve the immaculate inky darkness that's available on the brand's more potent models.

Still comfortably the best picture performer here, though. So the question is: can you afford it?

HCC VERDICT

Samsung UE32H6200 → £400

Overall ★★★★★

Approx £280 → www.toshiba.co.uk

Toshiba 32D3453DB

Another HD Ready challenger – but with a built-in DVD player, too



TOSHIBA'S 32D3453DB LOOKS good from a distance with its mix of rounded and angular corners and minimalist black finish (a 32D3454DB white version is available too). Get closer, though, and you become more aware of its rather plasticky construction and the relatively large width of the frame.

Yet it has an excuse for sporting chunkier bodywork than the other contenders: a built-in DVD player. A slot behind the TV's right edge pulls your platters in smoothly and cleanly, and unlike some DVD/TV combos it does this without you first having to select the DVD input.

This built-in player makes the 32D3453DB's £280 price tag look slightly more reasonable than it already did. As does its Cloud TV Smart engine, complete with streaming apps including Netflix and BBC iPlayer.

Picture quality is solid. Like the Panasonic, its native resolution maxes out at 1,366 x 768 but it does a strong job of reproducing the fine detail in my *American Hustle* Blu-ray, right down to the weave in both the period outfits and remarkable hairdos.

Colours are vibrant, revelling in the bold liveries of *Rush*'s F1 cars with plenty of punch, and the cars zip around the tracks with nothing to drastic in the way of detail loss.

The darkness of the clandestine meet with Robert De Niro in *American Hustle* reveals a decent black level by budget 32in TV standards. Another tick in the plus column is DVD playback from the integrated deck, which sees SD visuals upscaled with little fuss.

However, like the Finlux, the 32D3453DB is rendered a rather uneven picture performer by slightly uneven backlighting (especially along the

top edge), which affects dark scenes and results in less natural colour tones.

Add to the mix a perfectly adequate audio performance, though, and Toshiba's £280 32D3453DB can be considered a good-value option.

HCC VERDICT

Toshiba 32D3453DB → £280

Overall ★★★★★

Final standings

WHILE AT LEAST three of the models auditioned here have one or more compelling attractions, I can't shake the feeling that none of them totally nail the 32in value/performance balance. Still, until some mythical 32in maestro waltzes onto the test bench, we can only work with what we've got. And what we've got stacks up like this.

In last place – despite its extraordinarily low price – is the Finlux 32F8072-T. I love Finlux's ambition in delivering a Freeview HD tuner, Full HD panel and even some Smart functionality for less than the cost of a weekend break in Eastbourne, but in the end some backlight flaws make its pictures just uncomfortable to watch at times. By all means buy it for a children's playroom, but look elsewhere for your own entertainment.

Picking between the Toshiba 32D3453DB and Panasonic 32AS500 for second and third place is a tough call. Both are similarly priced, and both offer broadly similar levels of specification, including HD Ready rather than Full HD resolutions. The Panasonic clearly wins out where its Smart interface is concerned, but the 32D3453DB has that built-in DVD player, which could solve a few setup niggles.

In the end I've just leaned towards the Panasonic on account of its picture flaws being more consistent, and thus less distracting, than those of the Toshiba.

This leaves our group test champion as the £400 Samsung UE32H6200. It seems a bit boring to reward the most expensive contender with the winner's gong, but with its massive streamed video support, cute lines and clearly superior picture quality it makes a seriously strong – if not totally irresistible – 32in choice ■



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DIGITAL COPY

Mark Craven believes soundbars and soundbases are akin to the DVD-based 5.1 all-in-one systems of yesteryear, acting as a stepping stone to full-fat home cinema fun

THE IFA BERLIN technology expo is fast approaching, and on the show's Friday night I'll once again be gathering with the great and good of the AV world for the official European Imaging and Sound Association (EISA) awards.

These glamorous gongs, which have been distributed every year since 1982, are the result of a pan-European judging body that includes *Home Cinema Choice* and our stablemate *Hi-Fi News*, alongside other tech magazines from countries including Germany, Sweden, France and Spain. It covers a wide range of consumer electronics, including photography kit and in-car audio.

This year there are categories for both soundbar and soundbase, showing how rapidly the AV industry is changing. It's impossible these days to walk into any high street AV shop and not see a selection of these TV audio boosters, and consumer recognition is improving. **Mention the word 'soundbar' to your next-door neighbour and he/she may well know what you're talking about.** Try doing the same with 'Auro 3D'...

HCC has covered both these product categories since their launch. Soundbars began life as real high-end concerns, first with Pioneer's 254-driver PDSP-1 and then Yamaha's YSP-1, but the concept has developed to include bargain-priced stereo options that sell for less than £100. Soundbases have been more mass-market offerings ever since the Bose Solo TV initiated the idea of a TV speaker that you actually put underneath the TV.

The popularity of soundbars and soundbases doesn't necessarily extend to the AV traditionalist. Multichannel audio is, after all, a key part of the home cinema package – as key as spending a good five minutes trying to bypass your AVR's DSP

modes. And with Dolby Atmos readying for a big push, many film fanatics are contemplating more speakers in their setup, not less. Yet despite that, this issue we've rounded up eleven soundbar/soundbase options and offered some buying tips too. And here's why...

When I was a lad...

All home cinema enthusiasts have to start somewhere. Those that go straight from watching movies on a smallscreen TV to fitting four subwoofers in their dedicated attic theatre are – possibly with the exception of some lottery winners – non-existent. And soundbars, hopefully, are the stepping stone for some people between a rudimentary sonic performance with movies and an eventual discrete multichannel audio maelstrom.

They are the convenience-first all-in-one systems of the modern day. Around 10 years ago, DVD-based 5.1 packages were flying off the shelves. Buyers loved the thrill of 5.1 sound, even while those with bigger budgets laughed at the lightweight, compact enclosures. But I'll guarantee that some of those one-box systems have been replaced by AV separates and more potent loudspeakers. That's certainly what happened in my house.

The majority of soundbars and soundbases don't offer surround thrills, but consider what the best ones do bring to the party – room-filling punch, crystal-clear high-frequencies, full-bodied dialogue, wide, accurate imaging and, when a subwoofer is involved, pet-bothering bass. These are a good 50 per cent of the film soundtrack experience. And perhaps those who do invest in a soundbar will begin thinking about what they're missing out on ■

*Did your cinema start life as a one-box 5.1 system?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven uses the term 'pet-bothering' in zest. He has never tried to scare his cat with his subwoofer. The cat would just rip the woofer to shreds





FILM FANATIC

Should we really expect a barrage of Dolby Atmos discs in the UK given the track record many local film distributors have when it comes to Blu-ray audio? wonders **Anton van Beek**

THE PAST COUPLE of months have seen the AV industry come down with a serious case of Dolby Atmos fever. For a while it felt like every other press release that turned up in my inbox was from an AVR manufacturer, shouting about the fact that its latest models are ready for the advanced audio format.

And good on them, I say. As my fellow columnist Richard Stevenson has alluded to previously, AV receiver sales in the UK are fairly stagnant – so anything that can help encourage current owners to upgrade their existing kit (such as Onkyo's recent offer of free Dolby Atmos SKH-410 speakers to anybody buying one of three new receivers) should be seen as a good thing. Especially when you're talking about a technology that is so clearly aimed at existing home cinema fans, rather than enticing newcomers to give our hobby a try.

The upshot of this flurry of announcements is that the shelves of your local AVR stockist should now be piled high with new Dolby Atmos-compatible models from the likes of Onkyo, Denon, Marantz, Yamaha and Pioneer. But amongst all of the excitement about the incoming hardware there's been one thing that has been conspicuous by its absence – software.

Now, **being a Dolby Atmos early adopter could become a bit of a drag if there aren't many Blu-rays available that pack the relevant next-gen bitstreams.** What exactly are you going to use to showcase the extra electronics you've invested in? Having put this question to several industry spokespeople, I've been assured that a veritable 'deluge' of Dolby Atmos Blu-rays is on the way. The only trouble is that nobody seems willing to say what titles will be made available or just when they'll arrive.

Now it's possible that some blockbuster titles will already have been announced by the time you're reading this – but I'm not holding out too much hope. After all, we've already seen details released for two of the most obvious contenders – the US Blu-ray release of *Godzilla* (due September 16) and the UK Blu-ray release of *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (arriving November 10). And the press blurb for neither made any mention of a Dolby Atmos mix appearing on the Blu-rays.

Blu-ray audio blunders

More pertinently, regardless of how excited the AV industry may be about Dolby Atmos, I find it almost impossible to believe that UK Blu-ray distributors care even half as much.

Just this month the UK branch of Disney released *Muppets Most Wanted* (see p97) on Blu-ray with a DTS-HD High Resolution track, rather than DTS-HD Master Audio. It's not a one-off either, as the studio previously pulled the same trick with both *Mary Poppins* and *John Carter* – the latter being exactly the sort of blockbuster that would be a real Dolby Atmos contender if it was released today.

Or what about Warner Bros' decision to release *Pacific Rim* on Blu-ray in the UK last year with a 16-bit DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, instead of the 24-bit DTS-HD MA 7.1 incarnation that appeared on the same studio's prior US release?

Of course, that's just the tip of the iceberg, with countless other major titles (*Need for Speed* being one that immediately springs to mind), being downgraded from 7.1 to 5.1 in the UK. And you really expect these same UK distributors to now embrace Dolby Atmos on Blu-ray? I wouldn't bet on it... ■

Are you excited about the idea of Dolby Atmos on Blu-ray? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek isn't going to be adding in-ceiling speakers any time soon, simply because he's far too short to actually reach his ceiling





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THE INSIDER

Martin Dew reveals that region-coding isn't just a bugbear for Blu-ray fans in Blighty and suggests if you really want a complete disc library, it's time to brush up on your Japanese

DO YOU REMEMBER LaserDisc? I do, and I'm kind of glad it remained the clunky, short-lived technology it deserved to be. Nevertheless, as it evolved, it separated out the true home cinema buffs from the casual VHS-hungry masses, and eventually offered AC-3 encoded Dolby Digital 5.1 audio for the first time in the home. It also provided pretty acceptable pictures in both its longer-play CLV and shorter-play, less compressed CAV varieties. Yes, the latter required an audience to sit patiently while the operator flipped the disc every 20 minutes or so, but the picture and sound were so vastly superior compared to the videocassette that we lived happily with the compromises.

The only way to get your hands on American NTSC LaserDisc titles – as opposed to their often unobtainable and/or inferior PAL counterparts – was to buy them on the 'grey market', a term not often heard in our post-internet age. Not even HMV or Virgin stocked more than a handful of the 12in platters, so really the only means of adding them to your collection was to buy them from specialist resellers in the UK, or to order them direct from the US. Blighty's poor choice of readily available titles led to no end of frustration for consumers.

A similar predicament awaited the debut of the DVD. Although we knew region-coding was coming, the disproportionate list of movies that quickly became available on the format in the US, but not in the UK, was perplexing. DVD arrived just around the time I moved to the States, so I was spared much of the angst. Of course, it seemed logical that the largest market in the world would command the distribution of the largest number of titles. But it wasn't until Blu-ray came along that I realised the major studios' release strategies had become much more targeted and foreign territory dependant.

No doubt the distributors employ sophisticated metrics and criteria to judge what is going to sell where, and in which package. Take the *Jurassic Park* Blu-ray, for example. Until last year, it was only on sale as part of a three-pack trilogy in the US, so I ordered the single original region-free title from Amazon.co.uk. The same applied to *Star Trek The Motion Picture*, which was only available as part of a boxset in the US. Even more extraordinary, because no date had been set Stateside for *The China Syndrome* or *The Killing Fields*, some research revealed that both region-free movies could be bought from Amazon.co.jp. (I managed to translate my way to a couple of successful transactions.)

Now I am looking ever longingly across the water towards the old country, particularly at a raft of fabulous Region B locked titles from Arrow Films and Studio Canal. You, in turn, must be glancing over at us and crying out for our Region A locked Criterion Collection. **With region-coding, it seems that sometimes you just can't win.**

AV without the fuss

Surely as a response to people bemoaning the overwhelming feature sets on AV receivers and pre-amps, a couple of maverick hi-fi companies here have introduced relatively featureless slim-line (2U) home cinema processors. The Outlaw 975 and Emotiva UMC-200 are available by direct internet sale only and, unfortunately, the Outlaw doesn't come in a 240V flavour. Yet with each priced under \$600 including shipping, they appear to represent amazing value. Will the bigger AV brands pick up on the idea? It's a product space I intend to watch closely ■

*Do you import Blu-rays from around the world?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

UK-born **Martin Dew** trained as an actor but ended up working for Lucasfilm THX and then NEC in the US. Now, though, he's back in front of the camera



Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology?
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Goodbye standard-def!

Would I swap 10 standard-def broadcast channels for one 4K channel [*Digital Copy*, HCC #236]? Yes I would – although I do not have a 4K TV.

I would swap 10 SD channels for one more HD channel as well...
Ian King, via email

Mark Craven replies: Yes, we need more hi-def channels, too – on the free-to-air platforms at least. Channel 5 HD seems to be MIA.

Solve my system dilemma!

In answer to the question posed a few issues ago ('Are you listening to more music than ever on your AV setup?'), since 2006 I've owned a low-budget Sony



Arcam's FMJ AVR450: multichannel power with hi-fi heritage

or amplifier. For the former, I'm looking for a decent (universal) Blu-ray disc player that will work well with music in addition to movies.

I still can't

DAV-DZ500F all-in-one system. I tried some movies, but never got any real effect nor pleasure of surround sound.

So since I moved house I dropped the surround speakers, and I only use the two main speakers (left and right) and the

subwoofer. Mainly I listen to radio and CDs.

My goal is a NAS system filled with DSD or at least FLAC format music because my collection of CDs is too massive to store in my living room. Therefore I need a DLNA solution in a Blu-ray player

figure out what kind of configuration will satisfy me; AV receivers aren't quite hi-fi oriented, but they have a tuner built in, internet, DLNA etc. Yet they are also massive. I've been looking at all sorts – Sony's STR-DN1050, Pioneer's VSX-1124, Arcam's FMJ

★ STAR LETTER...

Are we being pushed away from physical discs?

I read with interest the article in HCC #235 by Mark Craven about his 'outdated' DVD collection, and it got me thinking about 4K.

At present 4K is only available online as there is still no sign of a physical format. I wonder how this makes the manufacturers feel? They have invested substantial amounts of money into bring TVs and PJs to market with nothing existing to help support them. Sure, we can buy Blu-rays that are mastered in 4K, but this is no substitute for the real thing. With the current debate about streaming versus physical, I have to wonder if this situation is perhaps deliberate. It seems to me that by selling hardware with the ability to watch 4K but only having the option of streaming 4K, we, the public, are being manipulated

into going online in an effort to push for an early demise to physical formats.

I, for one, hope that discs never disappear. Especially as where I live there is no option for superfast broadband, and isn't likely to be one for quite some time. Now I don't think that I live 'out in the sticks' but I am not alone in having no access to superfast broadband. Therefore, should the push by the likes of film studios, Amazon and Netflix to usurp physical media be successful, I and many like me would be stuffed!

Long live disc-viewing, be it on DVD or Blu-ray, not only as these are the only real alternative for me, but also because I – like many

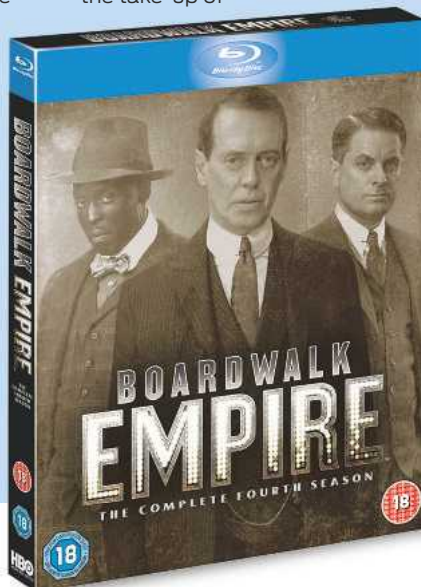
others – like to be able to own something tangible rather than something in the Cloud.

So, to sum up, someone needs to pull their finger out and get 4K out there on disc as soon as possible. This would also help in the take-up of

4K by the general public who cannot see what's available on download at the local supermarket.

Give us a 4K Blu-ray and surely no-one loses!
Steve Old, via email

Mark Craven replies: Interesting points, Steve, but I would have to disagree with your conspiracy theory that hardware manufacturers are pushing for an early demise for physical formats! Rather, the absence of a 4K disc format (Super Blu-ray, perhaps?) will be down to the complexities involved in creating a workable standard. Yes, it would be great if had arrived earlier this year, but I know it's not for the want of trying. An alternative – rival 4K disc standards, like the days





Captain America: The Winter Soldier featured a Dolby Atmos mix – new hardware from Onkyo supports the format

AVR450, the Yamaha RX-A1030... But I haven't decided yet. I would consider an integrated stereo amplifier, but would still need to look for a tuner.

And after that, I still need to figure out how I can connect another two wireless speakers...
Tony Foquet, Antwerp

of Betamax vs VHS – would be even worse.

Nor, I'm sure, do the studios want to see downloads destroy physical media. Disc sales are still healthy (even DVD) and enable studios to recoup plenty of their investment in movies long after they've left the multiplex. Are they prepared to live on streaming licences and broadcast TV alone? Not at the moment, certainly – and 4K Blu-ray is likely to present them with a high-end offering that they can charge a premium for initially.

Star letter-writer Steve wins a copy of *Boardwalk Empire: The Complete Fourth Season* on Blu-ray, which is available to buy now courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment.

Richard Stevenson replies: Tony, I think your opinion of surround sound and proper multichannel home cinema has been compromised by the low-budget Sony DAV-DZ500F! The good news is that it is eminently possible to build a system that offers breath-taking home cinema and true hi-fi music sound.

For your universal Blu-ray player, you should look at one of the Oppo BD players – the company has almost redefined what can be expected from a disc spinner. The more upmarket Oppo BDP-105D is an incredibly versatile machine for movie-watching, CD/SACD/DVD-A playback and streaming music from a NAS (with FLAC and DSD support), and its balanced analogue output offers true audiophile sound quality.

As for an amplifier, do not underestimate the stereo performance of AV receivers, as manufacturers do spend a lot of effort to get them sounding great with music. Of course, as an AVR has to deal with a lot more technology and channels of amplification, a £500 stereo amplifier should always outperform a £500 AVR for pure music. However as you spend more the gap narrows and AVRs



from the likes of Arcam, Marantz and Yamaha in particular are designed to deliver the companies' well-renowned stereo music performance and add multichannel surround sound. And with internet plus traditional tuners onboard, all your radio needs should be covered.

For speakers, I would say the Sony DAV-DZ500F system has got to go. If you have space for larger speakers (and the Sony system has tallboy models), look for a surround sound speaker package that is made up of components that the company also markets as stereo pairs. Big brands like KEF, B&W, Monitor Audio and Tannoy create stereo loudspeakers first and then combine them and develop a centre channel model for 5.1. This ought to ensure that the stereo performance from the front pair will be up to scratch.

Unfortunately, wireless speakers are few and far between and I would urge you to work out a way of getting cables to traditional rear speakers.

Moreover, wireless rears would still need to be plugged into the mains, are more expensive than passive models and would be running off different amplifiers to the main AVR – which will have a negative impact on the sound integration around the room.

Of course, if the rear speakers are a sticking point and you do not need HDMI switching, then don't under-estimate the thrilling movie performance a good 2.1 system can deliver. For the same money (although you don't say what your budget is) you will get better stereo music performance from an integrated two-channel amplifier, single

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pair of speakers and powerful subwoofer. From your letter it sounds like this may be the best way forward – and I never thought I would be pimping a 2.1 system in HCC!

Dolby Atmos a step too far

Regarding Richard Stevenson's chance of a Dolby Atmos system [Point of View, HCC #237] – sorry mate the cartoon for your article just about says it all. Her indoors would just not be happy! Home cinema speakers in everyday homes have now reached their practical limits. Harmony (you know what I mean) must be kept! Greg Lisowski, via email

Richard Stevenson replies: Well, you say that Greg, but I have the excuse that I need to fit more speakers into my system because it's imperative I remain abreast of each and every AV tech development. The same excuse seemed to work for DTS: Neo X height/width speakers, my 3D projector...

But, yes, it would seem that Dolby Atmos has a job on its hands to convince even those who have fitted 7.1 arrays that they need more speakers. But what we will see are two tiers of Atmos system – the high-end in-ceiling speaker-based setup with potent hardware, and a more living-room friendly and entry-level offering built around budget amps and add-on upwards-firing speakers or all-in-one packages (Onkyo has already announced hardware along those lines). It will be interesting to hear the performance of both!

Motion control sickness

Your review of the Xbox One Guide in the last issue hit the nail on the head – I bought one of the consoles just after Christmas (which included the Kinect hardware) and experimented with the voice control function for a day or so. It really isn't for me, as I was spending far too much time trying to 'talk' to my Xbox when I



Are touchpad controllers the best of both worlds?

could have been playing games. So I can't see voice control taking off. I have a similar function on my phone and I don't use that either. The same applies to motion control. Your reviews of new TVs sometimes mention that they can be controlled by waving your hand, etc, but who wants to do this? A traditional handset is far easier to use.

Simon Chester, via email

Mark Craven replies: Motion and voice control are intriguing developments that, I feel, just aren't quite the finished product

yet. It's almost as if the R&D teams of the major hardware brands know what they want to achieve (possibly from watching *Minority Report*) but just can't quite work out how to do it.

The ideal control system is one that is quick, intuitive and practically foolproof. And for me the humble zapper (maybe with a touchpad) is still the best thing we've got. Interactive app-based controllers can be great when it comes to operating products with in-depth levels of adjustment and multiple controls, but even then I am more likely to resort to the supplied handset – often because the handset is always there, on the arm of the sofa, when my tablet or smartphone are sitting on the kitchen counter.

Will voice and motion control survive? Probably. Don't forget how much Smart TVs have developed since their earliest days – the same could still happen to these new-fangled control systems ■

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C) Bela Lugosi

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Bound

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Which of the following movies was not directed by the Wachowskis?

Answer:

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Question:

Who is Spider-Man's alter-ego?

Answer:

- A) Peter Parker B) Peter Dinklage
C) Peter Griffin

Email your answer with '*Spider-Man*' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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SYSTEM SELECTOR!

Looking for the ultimate stealth cinema? Then check out this deliciously discreet but premium high-end 7.1 setup

Kit list:

Stealth Acoustics 7.1:	£6,000
Artcoustic Linax Sub + cabinet:	£3,000
Pure Theatre CR240:	£1,250
Sony VPL-VW500ES:	£8,000
Anthem D2V/P5/P2:	£17,000
Total:	£35,250



Once installed, Stealth Acoustics' LR series speakers (left) literally disappear from view

1. Speakers

Stealth Acoustics Linear Response series

This lineup of slim-profile in-wall – and 'invisible' – loudspeakers requires some installation ingenuity (cutting holes in your wall, basically, all helped by a supplied template and detailed instructions) but the end result is extraordinary, as the smooth front panel can simply be painted over for a truly hidden setup. Easier done at the room build stage, but retro-fitting is still an option.

Up and running, the Stealth Acoustics array is supremely potent: the LR3 models that we're using for the LCR stage (with smaller LR6s on surround duty) pack 8in bass drivers and claim a frequency response down to 40Hz. Sound quality is therefore fulsome across the audio band, and they excel at crafting a widely-dispersed, enveloping multichannel sound.

Cut the cost with... Monitor Audio Shadow

Affordable on-wall speakers with a thin chassis and flat-to-wall fixings. Only available in black though!

2. Subwoofer

Artcoustic Linax Sub SL

We could have opted for an in-wall subwoofer from the Stealth Acoustics range for low-frequency frolics, but we've plumped for this Artcoustic bass bin as it can, literally, become part of the furniture.

The Linax uses a duo of long-excursion 10in drivers, built into a sealed cabinet. Claimed frequency response reaches 20Hz, which will add potent sub-bass to our chosen speaker array. The enclosure is finished in gloss white and styled to look like a slab of AV furniture. You could stick your family photos on it and no one would be any the wiser. Even better, the Danish

audio brand sells an identical Linax AV cabinet, with a pull-down front panel concealing space for your home cinema hardware (and it offers an open back to improve airflow and enable connections).

The Linax sub is a passive model, so here it is paired with Artcoustic's rack-mountable 250W PA-250 subwoofer amplifier.

Cut the cost with... REL Habitat 1

This wall-mountable, £1,300 woofer uses REL's wireless LongBow transmission tech for a cable-free bass solution.





3. Amplification/processing Anthem D2V/P5/P2

The Stealth Acoustics speakers aren't the most sensitive models around (just 83dB) so our system needs some impressive power amps to do the heavy lifting. Enter this high-end pre/power combi from Canadian marque Anthem.

The D2V processor features 8 x HDMI inputs and twin outputs (so it can feed a secondary screen) and caters for all modern sound formats (okay, not Dolby Atmos), with twin bespoke DSPs and Anthem's laptop-assisted ARC EQ system delivering a class-leading sonic performance. Imaging and

detailing are sublime – unlike the button-strewn front-panel, which is a bit of an eyesore. Still it's how it sounds that's important...

With Anthem offering no seven-channel power amp, our 7.1 system requires both five-channel (the P5) and stereo models (the P2). Monoblock designs claiming a monstrous 325W-per-channel into eight Ohms, they offer headroom a plenty.

Cut the cost with... Denon AVR-4520

Put off by the Anthem's £17,000 approx price tag? Grab Denon's still-flagship AVR-4520 9 x 190W receiver for as little as £1,100.

4. Screen Pure Theatre CR240

A stealth cinema needs to keep itself hidden when not in use, so a drop-down projector screen is vital. Pure Theatre's Ceiling Recessed (CR) range offers

'The Stealth Acoustics speakers need quality amps to get the best out of them, so partner them with Anthem separates'

size options from 1.6m to 2.8m – we're opting for a 2.4m-wide (104in) 16:9 model for £1,250 approx.

IR-controllable via a bundled remote (but with the option of 12V trigger or RS232 functionality) the screen fits into your ceiling cavity and shouldn't pose much of a challenge to a keen DIY-er – it will, naturally, require a mains hookup to power the mech, but the fact that it can be installed without ripping out floorboards upstairs is a bonus.

Cut the cost with... Optoma 84in screen

A manual pull-down budget screen for just £70!

5. Projector Sony VPL-VW500ES

We've already pushed the boat out on the audio system, so it seems fitting to go the whole hog and match it with a high-class projector – in this case Sony's second-gen native 4K model. The Japanese brand is currently unique for offering consumers 4K projectors (the VPL-VW500ES has a higher-end sibling), and your £8,000 outlay grants you blisteringly-sharp upscaled Blu-ray images on a mammoth scale. Setup is aided by decent calibration tools, while styling and running noise

impress, too. And grab the optional IFU-WH1 wireless HD transmitter if you have a cable phobia.

Cut the cost with... Sony VPL-HW40ES

Available for around £1,900, this still quite sizable projector (compared to sub-£2,000 DLP rivals) utilises the same SXRD LCoS technology as Sony's 4K model and claims an identical 1,700 Lumens brightness rating, but crafts images at a regular Full HD resolution. Image quality is excellent for the money, albeit with a somewhat limited contrast.



Sony's PJ uses its bespoke SXRD tech

AND ADD THESE...

Grab these accessories for an effective system boost

Disc spinner



Make use of the Sony PJ's 4K/60p HDMI 2.0 connectivity with Panasonic's upscaling BD deck, which offers 4K passthrough and 4K JPEG playback. Available for around £500.

Sumptuous seating



Plant yourself in a prime seating position with one of Front Row's affordable dedicated cinema recliners. Pricing begins at £600 for a single fabric-covered manual model.

FILM FRANCHISE

Spider-Man

Unravelling the web around the swinging hero's journey to your home cinema...



Like Spider-Man himself, many of his enemies also take inspiration from the animal kingdom...



HAVING GIVEN TEENAGE comic book readers a hero of their own age to root for (rather than relegating them to a sidekick role) it's hardly surprising that Spider-Man became an instant hit following his debut in 1962. Such was his success that within a matter of years Spidey had become a Marvel icon, and it was only natural that he'd follow other popular comic book stars and make



the jump from page to screen. Or so fans thought.

When it came to television they were quickly proved correct. Over the past five decades Spider-Man has starred in two live action TV series (including a crazy Japanese *Power Rangers* precursor that had him pilot a giant robot

Being a superhero doesn't make relationships any easier...

called Leopardon...), plus eight cartoons and over 35 different videogames. Yet for all his success on the small screen, it took 40 years for Spider-Man to grace cinemas.

Studio entanglement

So why the wait? Well, the challenges in realising his super-powers on film certainly caused problems early on, but even advances in effects technology couldn't kick-start production, due to complicated licensing issues. Not even the might of James Cameron,

1,100,000

The amount paid (in US dollars) in a 2011 online auction for the highest-grade copy of *Amazing Fantasy* #15 known to exist. It originally sold for 12 cents

PLAYBACK EXTRA 93



Fantasy debut: Spidey made his debut in #15 of Marvel's anthology comic *Amazing Fantasy* (August 1962). The story proved so successful that the character was given his own title just seven months later.

Not-so-amazing: Several episodes from the short-lived live-action *The Amazing Spider-Man* TV series were released in cinemas outside of the US as a trio of feature-length movies.



fresh off *Terminator 2*, could help the character escape from a web of litigation between competing studios and producers.

It was only when Hollywood rivals Columbia Pictures and MGM/UA struck a deal in 1999 that the path was clear for Peter Parker's alter-ego to take his place among the modern pantheon of cinematic heroes. Since then he's already survived one franchise reboot and has several bigscreen spin-offs on the cards. It looks like Spidey is making up for all that lost time...

PICK OF THE BEST...

1 Spider-Man 2

Having proven his ability to helm a major studio blockbuster with the 2002 original, director Sam Raimi was able to cut loose with this cracking 2004 sequel pitting web-head against Doctor Octopus. Effortlessly combining superb special effects with a human story, it remains one of the best superhero flicks ever made.

2 Spider-Man: The Animated Series

While his movie career was still stalled, the 1990s saw Spider-Man make it big on the small screen with this hit cartoon series. Clocking up 65 episodes across five seasons, the fan-favourite 'toon adapted several major comic book storylines and was packed with cameos from other Marvel characters.

3 Spider-Man

Escaping from almost a quarter of a century in development hell, *Spider-Man* swung into cinemas in 2002 with enough spectacle and verve to ensure a healthy \$800m box office taking and the birth of a franchise.

AND THE WORST...

Spider-Man 3

Sam Raimi's superhero trilogy came to a messy conclusion, with a surfeit of villains (the studio insisted Raimi include Venom, a fan-favourite villain he had no interest in) and a multitude of plot-lines. Not the worst superhero film you'll ever see, but the drop in quality from its peerless predecessor is too great to overcome.

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting web-head can afford to miss out on these...

Amazing Spider-Man Omnibus #1



Why blow a fortune on a mint condition copy of *Amazing Fantasy* #15? Instead, pick up this £75 hardback, which reprints that iconic issue alongside the first 38 issues of Spidey's own comic and other appearances.

Spider-Man: The Movie poster



Remember the 1986 blockbuster *Spider-Man: The Movie*? No? Well that's understandable as it never actually went into production. But promotional material for it did – including this eye-catching teaser poster.

J. Scott Campbell Collection



Based on designs by comic book artist J. Scott Campbell, this stunning range of limited edition polystone statues from Sideshow Collectibles consists of Spidey himself, plus leading ladies Gwen Stacy and Mary Jane.

Spider-Man 2 videogame



It's only fitting that the greatest Spider-Man film should also have the best game. So dust off your PS2, Xbox or Gamecube and enjoy some retro gaming action.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Track down these *Spider-Man* films and cartoons on Blu-ray and DVD...

Spider-Man: SE (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man: The New Animated Series (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man [Superbit] (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man 2: SE (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man 2 [Superbit] (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man 2.1 (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man: High Definition Trilogy (All-region BD)

Spider-Man 3: SE (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man 3 [Amazon-exclusive Sleeve] (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man Unlimited: The Complete Series (R2 DVD)

Original Spider-Man: The Complete Collection (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man: The Animated Series – Boxset (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man Trilogy Steelbook (All-region BD)

The Amazing Spider-Man 3D (All-region BD)

The Amazing Spider-Man Gift Set (All-region BD – US Import)

Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends Boxset (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man 5000: The Complete Series (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man 2 [Mastered in 4K] (All-region BD – US Import)

Spider-Man [Mastered in 4K] (All-region BD)

The Amazing Spider-Man [Mastered in 4K] (All-region BD)

Ultimate Spider-Man: Vol 1-4 Boxset (R2 DVD)

Spider-Man 3 [Mastered in 4K] (All-region BD – US Import)

The Spectacular Spider-Man: Season One (R2 DVD)

The Amazing Spider-Man 2: Electro Collector's Edition (All-region BD – US Import)

The Amazing Spider-Man 2 3D (All-region BD)

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **NOAH** Biblical epic aims to flood your home cinema with sensational surround sound **THE QUIET ONES** Hammer tackles the found footage genre **THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL** Wes Anderson's latest dazzles in high-definition **TRANSCENDENCE** Johnny Depp's sci-fi thriller hits Blu-ray **BOUND** Cult favourite finally gets the release it deserves **AND MUCH MORE!**

Wrapped in plastic

Twin Peaks: The Entire Mystery → CBS Home Entertainment → All-region BD

The legendary TV series is reborn on Blu-ray. Find out if it has stood the test of time when we uncover the secrets of this hi-def boxset on p98

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Before the flood, Noah and family had a sideline modelling for the Millets catalogue



Biblical epic is a soggy mess

Filmmaker Darren Aronofsky is out of his depth with this bonkers water-logged blockbuster

→ NOAH

What's your favourite part in the story of Noah's Ark? Perhaps it's the bit where the animals go in two-by-two or when the dove returns to the Ark with an olive branch. But what about the part when Noah kills three starving men in retribution for them hunting an armadillo-dog? And how can you forget the battle with the rock giants?

Indebted as much to Peter Jackson's Tolkien movies as to the Biblical epics of yore, Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* is a very different take on the material to that which most of us will remember from our childhood. Mixing together elements from the *Book of Genesis* and the *Book of Enoch* (an ancient Jewish religious work ascribed to Noah's great-grandfather), the film offers a mix of post-apocalyptic visuals and epic battle scenes before the flood even hits. To top it all, the story is wrapped up in the most heavy-handed eco-parable imaginable.

Unsurprisingly, the result is a sodden mess; a high-budget misfire full of noise and thunder that centres entirely on Russell Crowe's permanently scowling, unsympathetic Noah to the exclusion of his thinly-drawn family. But for all of the weird animals, silly rock monsters and implied inbreeding the film packs in to its running time, the one thing that's been left out is God. Completely absent from Aronofsky's film is the divine being who communicates directly with Noah. Instead we have a more abstract 'Creator' who remains an off-screen presence, leaving Noah to be his grumpy representative.



HCC VERDICT

Noah
→ Paramount → All-region BD
→ £25 Approx

WE SAY: An spectacular-sounding Blu-ray outing for Darren Aronofsky's very, very silly Biblical blockbuster

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★☆☆☆

Picture: This Biblical blockbuster floats onto Blu-ray with a very agreeable AVC 1.85:1 Full HD encode.

As we've come to expect from Aronofsky, *Noah* is a dark and grimy film, painted almost entirely in shades of grey, brown and ochre. Thankfully, the clarity and sharpness of the digital presentation is such that it constantly reveals a wealth of fine detail in even the darkest sequences. The sudden emergence of a forest in Chapter 7 adds a splash of vibrancy to the palette with its greenery, but even this is washed away when the rain starts to fall.

Audio: *Noah*'s DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix delivers a truly divine audio experience. From thousands of birds circling overhead in Chapter 7 to the sound of war in the battle for the Ark in Chapter 13, the track regularly employs the entire soundfield, giving it an expansive and immersive feeling. Bass response is just as ferocious, with every move the rock giants make in helping to build and defend the Ark accompanied by deep, rumbling scrapings of stone on stone. Dialogue is also perfectly balanced and never drowned out by the onslaught of effects. You might want to buy the disc for the soundtrack alone...

Extras: This Blu-ray includes a trio of behind-the-scenes documentaries, with a combined running time of just over an hour. *Iceland: Extreme Beauty* focuses on the benefits of shooting on location in such difficult terrain. *The Ark Exterior: A Battle for 300 Cubits* addresses the design of the Ark and the amount of water used in recreating the downpour. Finally, *The Ark Interior: Animals Two by Two* looks at the interior set and the film's themes.

Muppets Most Wanted

Walt Disney → All-region BD
£25 Approx



While it never sinks quite as low as *Muppets from Space*, this sequel to the 2011 box office smash *The Muppets*

represents a noticeable dip in quality for the reinvigorated franchise. To make things even worse, Disney has pulled the same trick it did with *John Carter* and *Mary Poppins* in the past and downgraded the film's 5.1 audio from fully-lossless DTS-HD MA to DTS-HD HR on this UK Blu-ray. On the other hand, the disc's 1.78:1-framed 1080p imagery looks superb with its robust palette and intricately resolved textures.



The Zero Theorem

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Terry Gilliam's latest sci-fi outing marks a return to the sort of Orwellian paranoia he tackled back in *Brazil*,

only this time coupled with concerns about the future of connected technology and its potential impact on humanity. While the result isn't a patch on his 1985 classic, there's still a lot for his fans to enjoy about this carnival of surreal sights and ideas. The Blu-ray itself also delivers with a striking AVC 1.85:1 1080p image (which rather unusually exposes the full 35mm frame), atmospheric DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack and a broad selection of behind-the-scenes featurettes.



Divergent

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This *Hunger Games*-wannabe adapts the first of Veronica Roth's trilogy of 'young-adult' sci-fi novels and hits

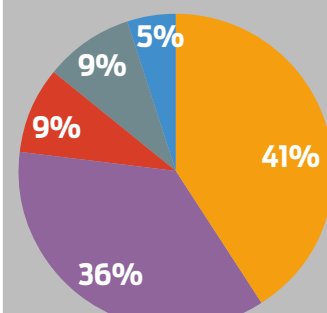
every expected plot point in its tale of a spirited girl (Shailene Woodley) growing up in a post-apocalyptic society split into five factions. It's extremely predictable, but a fair way to pass an evening, and this Blu-ray release does its best to make it more appealing to AV enthusiasts with cleanly delineated AVC 2.40:1 1080p visuals and strident DTS-HD MA 7.1 sonics. Backing up the flick are plentiful bonus features including two chat-tracks, a four part *Making of...* and four deleted scenes.



WE ASKED...

Which is the best of the five Spider-Man movies?

■ Spider-Man ■ Spider-Man 2
■ Spider-Man 3
■ The Amazing Spider-Man
■ The Amazing Spider-Man 2



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
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Come on feel the noize...

Retro possession chiller takes a Hammer to the found footage sub-genre

→ THE QUIET ONES

This throwback horror stars Jared Harris as a college professor who gathers together a trio of students to conduct an ethically dubious study of a young woman (Olivia Cooke) who is seemingly plagued by supernatural phenomena. He intends to prove that her problems are caused by negative energy, rather than supernatural hocus-pocus; energy that can be drawn out and destroyed. And we can all guess how that is going to pan out...

While a little too fond of using its '70s setting to remind viewers of other (better) genre outings, *The Quiet Ones* still has a major ace up its sleeve in the form of Olivia Cooke. The young actress is an absolute revelation here as the damaged subject of the experiments, giving a performance of astonishing intensity and believability that completely hooks you into the narrative and lets you overlook some of its dafter twists and turns.

Picture: *The Quiet Ones* employs three different aesthetic approaches – traditional digital cinematography, plus 16mm and 8mm footage supposedly recorded by the characters. However, the entire film was actually recorded using Arri Alexa cameras, with the degraded 16mm and 8mm effects added in post-production.

As you'd expect, the more traditional 'omniscient' digital footage looks excellent, with nice clarity and sharpness despite the rather muted '70s palette. As for the rest, the faux 16mm arguably overplays its hand for stylistic effect, looking a touch too muddy compared to genuine 16mm footage, while the faux 8mm is riddled with fake scratches and other debris.



Nobody was impressed by Olivia's Pocahontas impression

Audio: *The Quiet Ones* is a pretty ironic title for a film sporting a soundtrack that goes out of its way to assault your eardrums at every opportunity.

From the thumping bursts of Slade repeatedly used to deprive Jane of sleep to the aggressive use of the surrounds employed whenever 'Evey' makes her presence felt, this DTS-HD MA 5.1 track succeeds at everything that is asked of it. It also does wonders for Lucas Vidal's unusual score, which is built around the curious sounds made by the film's experimental kit.

Extras: Director/co-writer John Pogue is joined by producer Tobin Armbrust for a very technically-minded audio commentary. Joining this is the 35-minute *Welcome to the Experiment: Making of The Quiet Ones* documentary and the eight-minute *Manifesting Evil* featurette, which looks at the creation of the film's atmospheric opening titles. Rounding out the extras are 24(!) deleted scenes and a three-minute gag reel.



HCC VERDICT

The Quiet Ones

→ Hammer/Lionsgate

→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Olivia Cooke's spirited central performance and superb lossless audio make this chiller worth a spin on BD

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Twin Peaks' railway station was in need of some refurbishment

DISC
OF THE
MONTH



A damn good Blu-ray boxset

The perfect way to rediscover David Lynch and Mark Frost's brilliantly bizarre TV phenomenon



From Bob to the Log Lady, *Twin Peaks* is packed with memorable characters

→ TWIN PEAKS: THE ENTIRE MYSTERY

Created by David Lynch and Mark Frost, *Twin Peaks* single-handedly redefined TV drama. This riveting and unusual tale of the investigation into the murder of a small-town homecoming queen not only showed that viewers enjoyed being challenged and provoked by TV shows, but also introduced a level of cinematic quality to serialised drama that we've become so used to today.

While received wisdom has it that the show fell apart early in its second season after revealing the identity of the killer (the driving force behind the series until then), this isn't really the case. Yes, there were a few bumps along the way due to Lynch and Frost being distracted by separate projects. But even then *Twin Peaks* was never less than entertaining, and when the creative team returned for the second half of Season Two, and took things into even more Lynchian weirdness, it hit an all-new high. Only to then be cruelly cut down in its prime.

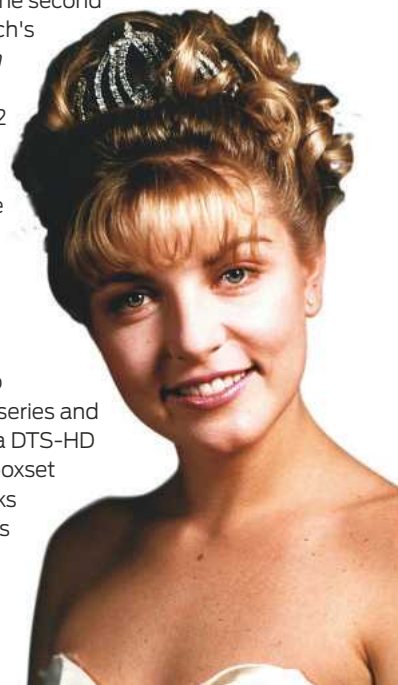
Lynch did, of course, return to the town of Twin Peaks a year later with *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, a movie prologue to the series depicting the last seven days of Laura Palmer's life. Unjustly reviled by critics and audiences on its original release, the movie has since undergone something of a re-evaluation and is now seen as one of the director's best, a nightmarish tale of domestic violence that uncovers the hidden horror that always lay at the heart of the series.

Behind Laura Palmer's homecoming queen smile (right) lies a secret life of sex and drugs

Picture: By virtue of the talent behind it and the fact that it was shot on 35mm, *Twin Peaks* has always been one of the most cinematic-looking TV shows around – something that really bares fruit with this Blu-ray restoration. There is some slight variation in quality across the restored episodes, most obviously when dealing with special effects done in standard-definition – a prime example being the giant transforming into a ball of light at the end of the first episode of the second season. However, aside from these minor niggles, the overall quality of the new restorations is stunning.

The set also includes the second UK Blu-ray outing for Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. The first attempt was as part of Universal's 2012 *David Lynch Boxset* where it was presented as a 1080i50 encode. The version here trumps that release by being correctly presented in 1080p, in addition to its improved colour accuracy.

Audio: The original stereo soundtracks for both the series and the film have been given a DTS-HD MA 7.1 makeover for this boxset (although the stereo tracks are also included, albeit as lossy DD 2.0).



THE MISSING PIECES

The best of the deleted scenes from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me...*

This One's Coming from J. Edgar: FBI Special Agent Desmond and the steel-bending Sheriff Cable come to blows as the latter tries to obstruct the agents from removing Teresa Banks's body.



Buenos Aires/Above the Convenience Store: Ever wonder what David Bowie's missing agent was doing before and after his freaky visit to the FBI field office? Suffice to say it doesn't look like a fun journey...



The Palmers: 'Where's my axe? I'm hungry!' cries Leland as he sits down for dinner with his wife and daughter – before trying to teach them Norwegian – in a glimpse of happier times for the Palmers.



2x4: A typically fun appearance by the late Jack Nance as he's confronted by a disgruntled customer and is forced to explain why a two-by-four piece of wood never measures two-by-four.

Thankfully the show's surround mix never overplays its hand, instead treating the original sound design with respect, using the extra speakers to distribute scene-setting effects and immerse you even further in Angelo Badalamenti's haunting music. That said, the biggest beneficiary of the remix is the LFE channel, which gets plenty of material to work with.

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me fares even better, with its even more complex and forceful soundscape benefiting from the additional directionality and dedicated bass output. Chapter 25's notorious nightclub scene sounds more threatening than ever, with the thumping music overpowering the dialogue just as it was always meant to (although some diehard fans will quibble with the use of burnt-in subtitles in this sequence, which weren't present during the original UK theatrical run).

Extras: For many people the main selling point of this 10-disc boxset will be the vast array of extras it contains, most notably *The Missing Pieces*. This collection of 91 minutes of deleted and extended scenes from *...Fire Walk with Me* has taken on legendary status over the years, and now that they're finally available they don't disappoint (we've picked four of our favourites above).



Elsewhere, the 38-minute *Between Two Worlds* finds David Lynch sitting down first with Laura, Sarah and Leland Palmer to discuss their lives, and then with the actors who played them (Sheryl Lee, Grace Zabriskie and Ray Wise) to reminisce about making the series and the prequel movie.

Just as entertaining is the 56-minute *A Slice of Lynch: Uncut*, which features Lynch enjoying coffee and – naturally – cherry pie with actors Kyle MacLachlan and Mädchen Amick, plus post-production supervisor John Wentworth.

And that's just the tip of this hugely expansive iceberg. Also included are countless documentaries, featurettes, cast and crew interviews, promos, *Log Lady Intros*, deleted scenes and much, much more.



The weird dialogue effect used in the *Black Lodge* (left) was done by the cast saying their lines backwards and then playing it in reverse



Kyle MacLachlan regrets asking his dog to fetch today's newspaper



HCC VERDICT

Twin Peaks: The Entire Mystery

→ CBS Home Entertainment

→ All-region BD → £50 Approx

WE SAY: One of the best Blu-ray releases this year and the perfect way to fall in love with *Twin Peaks* again

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Grid: Autosport

Codemasters → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £40 Approx



To say that last year's *Grid 2* proved to be rather divisive is something of an understatement. For every gamer who enjoyed the arcade-style thrills offered by Codemasters' racer, there was another lamenting the move away from more serious driving simulations.



While it can be seen as something of a stop-gap release as we await the first next-gen outing in the series, *Grid: Autosport* is also a clear attempt to win back those fans who thought that Codemasters was abandoning hardcore petrolheads in pursuit of a broader audience. The game's front-end has been completely

redesigned, cutting away the flashy interfaces and pointless attempts at narrative in favour of simple menus that get you straight into the driving action.

Gone too are the arcade-style driving models. While *Grid: Autosport* doesn't quite retreat all the way into serious simulations, it still requires serious skill to master and constantly challenges you with the combative AI of your fellow drivers. The racing itself is split across five distinct disciplines: Touring, Endurance, Open Wheel, Tuner and Street, each of which has to be mastered in order to open up the larger tournaments. The game doesn't skimp on multiplayer modes either, even going so far as to offer a splitscreen option – which is one hold-over from the days of old-school arcade racing that everyone should be happy about.



Ultra Street Fighter IV

Capcom → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £25 Approx



In the four years since it first battered out of the arcades and on to home consoles, Capcom's *Street Fighter IV* has reigned supreme as the king of the one-on-one beat 'em ups. While much of this is down to the game's brilliant mechanics, it hasn't hurt that the developer has kept a stream of updates and expansions coming



(both as standalone releases and DLC), offering new characters and countless gameplay tweaks.

Ultra Street Fighter IV promises to be the last of these and elevates what was already the best brawler around to a whole new level, adding six new

stages, five new characters and a trio of new gameplay mechanics. If this doesn't sound like much, you're in for a big surprise. While four of the five new characters are familiar from *Street Fighter X Tekken* they've been completely reconfigured and all feel perfectly at home here. Even better are the tweaks that have been made to the game following extensive fan feedback. Red Focus, Ultra Combo Double and Delayed Standing significantly alter the core experience, making the game more balanced than ever before and introducing a different strategic level for players of all abilities. All of which ensures that Capcom's latest reigns supreme as the undisputed king of beat 'em ups.



Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide Part Two

Nucleus Films → R0 DVD
£20 Approx



A must for any movie buff who grew up during the moral panic surrounding violence in films in the '80s and early '90s, this triple-disc set is packed with all manner of treats. First up is Jake

West's excellent new documentary *Draconian Days*, which puts the James Ferman-era BBFC under the microscope. The other two discs are given over to more than nine hours of trailers and expert discussion relating to the 83 films that appeared on the Director of Public Prosecutions' 'Section 3' list. Fascinating stuff.



Boardwalk Empire: Season Four

HBO Home Entertainment
All-region BD → £45 Approx



The latest season of HBO's prohibition era gangster series may flounder a little in its first few episodes, but a larger role for Michael K. Williams as Albert 'Chalky' White helps the show

regain its footing and end up every bit as captivating (and even more heartbreaking) than its predecessors. Despite dropping from five to four BD50 platters this time around, the season's 12 AVC-encoded episodes look criminally strong, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is brilliantly immersive. Extras include six episode commentaries, interactive episode guides and five featurettes.



Futurama: Season Seven

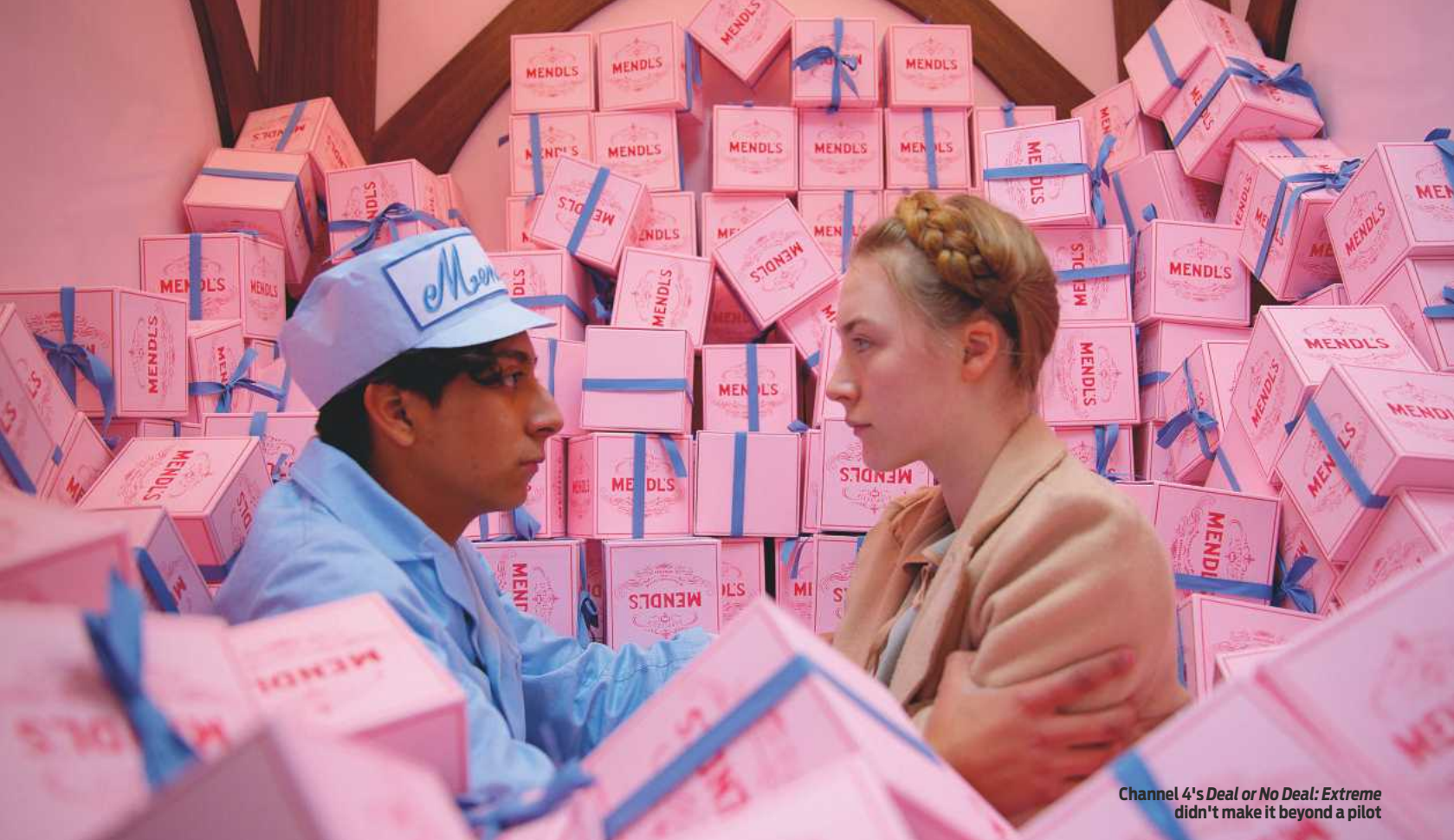
20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD
£30 Approx



Barring another unexpected resurrection, this represents the penultimate Blu-ray outing for Matt Groening's animated sci-fi sitcom. And once again you have another 13 episodes

packed full of satire and pastiche that may veer a little in quality, but still leave you with a smile on your face. The same can also be said of the set's AV prowess, due to the high-quality AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes and DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio present across both Blu-rays. Extras include chat-tracks and deleted scenes.

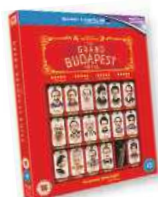




Channel 4's *Deal or No Deal: Extreme* didn't make it beyond a pilot

A holiday destination like no other

Impressive Blu-ray package ensures you'll want to check in to Wes Anderson's whimsical hotel



→ THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL

Set in the fictional European country of Zubrowska, Wes Anderson's latest quirky comedy relates the tale of how a lobby boy called Zero would one day end up as the multimillionaire owner of the lavish hotel of the title.

As fans will have come to expect from Anderson, the story itself is a bizarre one, full of eccentric characters and unlikely events – all played out amidst the most meticulously constructed *mise-en-scène* imaginable. However, amongst the whimsy and slapstick there are signs of Anderson stretching himself thematically and tackling more tragic material than usual. It'll be fascinating to see where he goes from here.

Picture: Kicking off with a message asking you to 'set your monitor to 16 x 9' this Blu-ray presentation of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is framed at three different aspect ratios (1.85:1, 2.35:1 and 1.33:1), depending on the time period being depicted. Thankfully, all three look magnificent as Anderson once again indulges his passion for lush production design full of rich colours and ornate detailing.

The only slight issue of any note is that the purple tinting applied to many of the 1.33:1 sequences also

has an adverse affect on blacks levels. This stems from the grading of the film rather than the encode, but might still annoy some of you.

Audio: It's never the most bombastic DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, but *The Grand Budapest Hotel*'s sound design still impresses. The hotel itself positively bustles with clearly delineated activity in all speakers, dialogue is immaculately rendered and Alexandre Desplat's score is given a chance to shine. It's just a shame that the mix is lacking that extra bit of 'oomph' when it comes to delivering more energetic scenes, such as a ski chase and shootout.

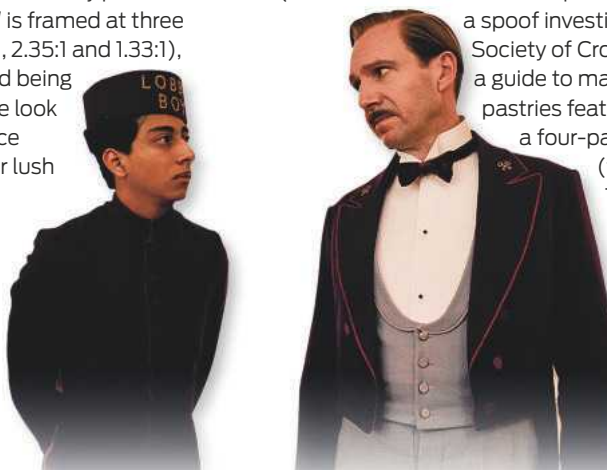
Extras: Once again it appears that any fans hoping for a feature-packed Blu-ray edition of a Wes Anderson film will have to wait for the inevitable Region A-locked Criterion Collection edition.

As it stands, this rather more modest collection of bonus bits comprises a four-minute location tour with Bill Murray; a trio of three-minute *Vignettes* (an in-character slide-show presentation,

a spoof investigation into 'The Society of Crossed Keys' and a guide to making one of the pastries featured in the film);

a four-part *Making of...*

(that runs around 18 minutes); two featurettes about the cast and director; a gallery of 40 photos; and the trailer.



On-screen typographic effects are just one of the aesthetic tricks Anderson uses



HCC VERDICT

The Grand Budapest Hotel

→ 20th Century Fox

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Extras may be a little thin on the ground, but this is still a charming hi-def package for Anderson's latest

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

Morgan Freeman was gutted to learn that his local Apple Store had sold out of the latest iPhone...



Nolan's ghost in the machine

The spirit of his mentor looms large in cinematographer Wally Pfister's directorial debut

→ TRANSCENDENCE

When controversial but brilliant Artificial Intelligence creator Will Caster (Johnny Depp) is assassinated by anti-technology extremists, his wife Evelyn (Rebecca Hall) manages to meld his consciousness with an A.I., keeping him alive in a computer mainframe. Or did she? Is the machine consciousness really Will? And if not, what hope does anybody have of shutting down the increasingly powerful virtual being?

On paper Wally Pfister's directorial debut sounds like a cracking sci-fi thriller full of big ideas seemingly ripped straight out of the pages of *New Scientist* magazine. Which only makes the finished product all the more disappointing.

The story is riddled with massive plot holes (how exactly can Paul Bettany's science-writer be kidnapped and held hostage for years by terrorists without anybody either noticing or caring?) and leaden dialogue. This wouldn't be insurmountable if the film was fun or exciting, but in addition to aping some of mentor Christopher Nolan's directorial style, Pfister has also adopted his talent for taking outlandish concepts and dealing with them in a painfully po-faced manner.

So, while Pfister seems to believe he's making something along the lines of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in reality *Transcendence* is just a new *Lawnmower Man* – albeit stripped of any trace of action, drama and cyber-sex.

Picture: *Transcendence* arrives on Blu-ray with a good, but not great, 2.40:1-framed 1080p encode.

The obvious strength of the imagery comes from its clarity, with almost every shot looking extremely sharp and detailed. However, it would appear that this has been achieved in part with the aid of post-production tinkering, with some obvious ringing in brighter scenes betraying the use of artificial sharpening tools. Meh.

Audio: Given the lack of dramatic momentum and action in the film, it should hardly come as a surprise that *Transcendence*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is more concerned with atmospheric effects than dynamics. Use of the surrounds is rarely invasive until Will takes a stand in the final act, but the track still does a reasonable job of creating an effective soundfield that ably supports the film's imagery.

Extras: Interested in finding out more about the making of the movie? Then you'd best look elsewhere, as this Blu-ray offers nothing of any real value.

The four featurettes are pure EPK-fodder, consisting of show clips of talking heads between excerpts from the film, and only one of them clocks in at over three minutes.



HCC VERDICT

Transcendence

→ Entertainment in Video
→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: There's nothing transcendent about this tedious sci-fi drama or the hi-def platter it arrives on

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★☆☆☆



The Double

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Jesse Eisenberg stars in hipster director Richard Ayoade's bleakly surreal take on Dostoyevsky's famous novella.

Redolent of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (only even more dispiriting), the film tells the story of a timid office worker whose life is turned upside down by a new co-worker who is his exact double physically, but his exact opposite in every other regard. Despite instances of black crush, the BD's AVC 1.85:1 Full HD encode copes well with the drab visuals, but the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix proves to be understandably low-key. Extras are limited to a *Making of...*, three deleted scenes and four extended scenes.



Calvary

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Writer/director John Michael McDonagh re-teams with *The Guard* star Brendan Gleeson for an affecting

and darkly comic drama about a priest who is told by one of his congregation during confession that he will be killed in a week's time. While the subject matter and humour is as dark as it comes, EntertainmentOne's Blu-ray features a surprisingly bright and colourful (not to mention impeccably resolved) AVC 2.40:1 1080p transfer. *Calvary*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is more atmospheric than bombastic, and extras are limited to short EPK-style interviews with 17 members of the cast.



Warrior King 2

EntertainmentOne → R2 DVD
£13 Approx



Thai martial artist Tony (Ong-Bak) Jaa's first movie since giving up life as a Buddhist monk and returning to

filmmaking was also the first 3D Thai action blockbuster. Sadly, while the fight scenes are great, the film itself isn't – thanks to some of the most distractingly awful CGI effects since *Van Helsing*. While it's entirely possible that the native 3D photography may have helped disguise this issue, we'll never know as the distributor has decided to forgo Blu-ray altogether in the UK. Instead we have to make do with an average-looking DVD with a ridiculously loud DD 5.1 soundtrack.



Almost Human

Metrodome → R2 DVD
£15 Approx



Two years after he disappeared in a mysterious flash of light, Mark Fisher returns home as

something not entirely human, and with dark designs on his former girlfriend. This low-budget shocker eschews such niceties as story in favour of taking a grab-bag approach to the director's favourite moments from the '80s fright flicks he evidently grew up watching. *Almost Human* beams down onto DVD with an authentically grainy anamorphic 1.78:1 transfer and unassuming Dolby Digital 2.0 sonics. Extras are limited to a FrightFest Q&A with the film's director and star.



An education in sit-com success

Comedy show returns to its former glory – but what happened to all the DVD extras?

→ COMMUNITY: THE COMPLETE FIFTH SEASON

Following a rather hit-or-miss fourth season (or the 'gas-leak year' as it's referred to here), show creator Dan Harmon returned to the fold for this latest batch of 13 episodes, and in the process brought *Community* back to its geek-friendly best.

Having graduated last term and found the real world disappointing, the study group re-enrolls at Greendale Community College, with the exception of Pierce (Chevy Chase), who has passed away, and Jeff (Joel McHale), who accepts a job there teaching law. Cue another series of bizarre misadventures (such as a campus-spanning game of Hot Lava) and hilarious parodies (the David Fincher style investigation into the 'Ass Crack Bandit'). Best of all though is episode *G.I. Jeff*, which finds the former lawyer battling his personal demons in the retro '80s cartoon world of *G.I. Joe* (complete with spoof live-action toy ads).

Here's hoping that the cracking cult comedy can continue this spectacular run of form in the future now that Yahoo has saved it from cancellation.

Picture: The 13 anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers have been split across two DVD platters and look extremely robust, with no sign of artefacting or other compression issues. The one exception, of course, is *G.I. Jeff*, which opts for a retro cartoon look complete with speckles, scratches and even fake dirt trapped between the animation cells. Fabulous.

Audio: The show has always delivered surprisingly effective Dolby Digital 5.1 tracks and Season Five is no different. Dialogue is clean and pinned to the



Breaking Bad's Jonathan Hickey (pictured at rear) joins the cast this season

centre channel, while the surrounds get plenty of use during, with highlights including Episode Two's student riot and Episode Five's *Mad Max*-esque assault on 'Shirley Island'.

Extras: *Community* has exactly the kind of geeky fanbase who relish the extra features included on the show's DVD releases. Which means that the UK arm of Sony Pictures has (to use the show's own vernacular) well and truly Britta'd the hell out of this Season Five DVD by making it a barebones affair.

By contrast, Sony Pictures' US release follows the usual route of including commentaries on every episode, outtakes and a couple of *Making of...* featurettes (*Re-Animating the '80s* and *Advanced Television Production: 5 Days, 2 Scripts, No Sleep*). As there's zero chance of Sony Pictures re-issuing the title over here with all of the extras, the only solution is that UK fans forego this release and import the US set instead.



HCC VERDICT

Community: The Complete Fifth Season

→ Sony Pictures → R2 DVD

→ £25 Approx

WE SAY: Sony UK's decision to ditch the extras is simply unforgivable

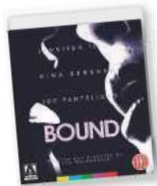
Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Girls just want to have fun...

Stylish lesbian crime drama delivers a winning mix of lust, love and loot

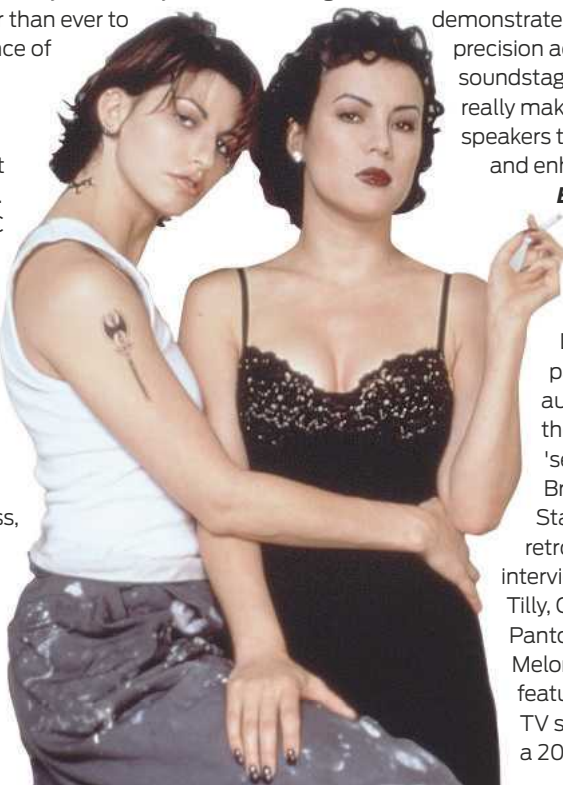
→ BOUND

Before dazzling mainstream cinema audiences with *The Matrix*, Andy and Lana (née Larry) Wachowski made a splash on the indie movie scene with this hugely enjoyable neo-noir thriller.

Stripped of the attention once lavished on its lesbian sex scenes (which barely raise an eyebrow these days), it's now easier than ever to truly appreciate the brilliance of *Bound*'s intricate plotting, tongue-in-cheek bravura, central performances and stylish visuals. Low-budget filmmaking at its very best.

Picture: This Blu-ray's AVC 1.85:1 imagery may not be the most refined 1080p encode you'll ever see, but we've no doubt that it's a pretty accurate reflection of the source material.

While close-ups reveal pleasing amounts of fine detail, clarity and sharpness, in medium and long shots they're held at bay by the use of heavy shadows to emulate the look of old black-and-white film noir productions. Many of these large areas of darkness have been



deliberately crushed, giving them (and any other blacks in the same shot, including hair and clothing) a uniformly flat look. But as this was done intentionally, it's hard to imagine the film looking better than it does here.

Audio: *Bound* arrives on Blu-ray with a choice of two soundtracks – an LPCM 2.0 presentation of the original stereo mix and a DTS-HD MA 5.1 remix. Both demonstrate excellent clarity and precision across the front of the soundstage, with the 5.1 mix only really making use of the surround speakers to deliver ambient effects and enhance the score.

Extras: Banish any memories you still have of the mediocre bundles of extras that *Bound* was tied to on DVD. Arrow's lavish Blu-ray package comprises an audio commentary (with the Wachowskis joined by 'sex consultant' Susie Bright and editor Zach Staenberg); a 29-minute retrospective *Making of...*; new interviews with actors Jennifer Tilly, Gina Gershon, Joe Pantoliano and Christopher Meloni; two archival promo featurettes; three trailers; two TV spots; a stills gallery; and a 20-page booklet.



The film convinced Warner Bros. to allow the Wachowskis to direct *The Matrix*



HCC VERDICT

Bound

→ Arrow Academy → Region B BD/R2 DVD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: This impressive Blu-ray easily makes amends for *Bound*'s dismal treatment on DVD in the past

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Remo Williams: The Adventure Begins

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£23 Approx



This actioner has a devoted cult following that will lap up this belated Blu-ray. The story of a New York cop nabbed by a secret government organisation and trained by a quirky Korean

martial arts master to, among other things, dodge bullets and walk on water, it's both funny and thrilling, with *Goldfinger* director Guy Hamilton staging some impressive set pieces. The disc's 1.85:1 image and stereo audio is far from mind-blowing, but the plethora of extras more than makes up for it – highlights include a producers' commentary, reversible sleeve art, booklet and new feature-length doc about '80s action flicks.



L'Assassino

Arrow Academy → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£23 Approx



Marcello Mastroianni plays an unscrupulous antiques dealer accused of killing his wealthy older lover in this

Kafka-esque thriller. The directorial debut of underrated Italian filmmaker Elio Petri, *L'Assassino* arrives on Blu-ray with a beautiful monochrome AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode derived from a 2K restoration of the original camera negative (missing the first and last reels) and a first-generation interpositive. The restored LPCM 2.0 dual mono soundtrack does the best it can with the rather flat source material. Pick of the extras is a 51-minute documentary about the film's co-writer 'Tonino' Guerra.



Branded to Kill

Arrow Academy → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£23 Approx



Seijun Suzuki's delirious 1967 masterpiece tells the demented tale of a Yakuza assassin who botches a job (when a

butterfly's wing blocks the scope on his gun) and ends up being targeted himself. Another magnificent addition to Arrow's art house label, *Branded to Kill* utilises the same hi-def elements created by Criterion for its 2011 release. Elsewhere, however, Arrow's disc trumps the Criterion effort thanks to the inclusion of *Trapped in Lust*, a raunchy and weird 1973 Japanese erotic re-imaging of Suzuki's film. Other extras include interviews with *Branded to Kill*'s director and star, plus a 28-page booklet.



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Photo: Artcoustic SA and Sphere Custom Design

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The European Imaging & Sound Association AWARDS 2014–2015



The EISA Awards celebrate the very best in home entertainment technology – make sure the following products are on your audition list

The European Imaging and Sound Association (EISA) is the technology world's largest independent awards panel, incorporating nearly 50 specialist magazines from across the continent – including *Home Cinema Choice*. Its goal is simple: to celebrate the most desirable, highest-performing home entertainment hardware that you – the AV enthusiasts – will be spending your hard-earned pennies on.

The featured awards here are the selections covering home theatre audio, home theatre displays and video, from flatscreen TVs to Blu-ray players, speakers, projectors and AV receivers. Chosen after a lengthy judging process throughout the Summer, during which the member magazines convene and whittle down a shortlist, these can be considered the cream of the consumer electronics crop. Read on...

EUROPEAN 4K ULTRA HD TV 2014-2015**SONY KD-65X9005B**

Size, sound and Ultra HD resolution, all in one amazing package – Sony's KD-65X9005B is perfect for those seeking high-end home entertainment thrills. Whether you're viewing your own pictures and videos, upscaling Blu-rays and TV broadcasts or streaming native 4K material, this 65-inch LED screen impresses, particularly with the control given over its upscaling engine. Sony's unique Triluminos technology offers a wide range of natural and realistic colours, while X-tended Dynamic Range processing enables superb contrast. HDMI 2.0 support, an on-board HEVC decoder and HDCP 2.2 compatibility make it ready for all foreseeable 4K content. And then there's the audio. The 'Wedge' cabinet design and revamped Magnetic Fluid speakers combine to provide authentic bass and crisp, high frequencies – no other TV sounds as good. And if you want even more bass, Sony's wireless SWF-BR100 subwoofer is an option.



**EUROPEAN FULL HD TV
2014-2015****Samsung UE55H7000**

Samsung's UE55H7000 offers a best-in-class Full HD performance for those not yet ready to step up to Ultra Hi-Def, with accurate colours, high contrast – thanks to its Micro Dimming Pro technology – and smooth, detailed motion. Images are sharp and cinematic, and wide-ranging calibration options allow them to be tailored to your preferences. In use, the Smart Touch Control makes it easy to interact with the Samsung's menus, Smart TV platform and other features, while the Quad Core processor ensures fast operation. Wireless connectivity brings multiple benefits too, including home networking, mobile device screen mirroring and internet access. A great all-round offering is completed by Samsung's discreet Floating Canvas Design, which keeps your eyes focused only on the picture.

**EUROPEAN SMART TV
2014-2015****LG 55LB870V**

With its webOS technology, it's safe to say that LG has this year redefined the concept of Smart TV, offering the user a simple, powerful, fast and – most importantly – enjoyable connected experience. This new customisable interface allows access to all content, be it internet apps, home media, external devices or broadcast TV, as well as the TV's settings – all delivered at lightning-fast speed. Control, via the redesigned Magic Remote, is highly intuitive, and the 55LB870V's interactive setup is a welcome innovation. Picture quality on this 55-inch TV is excellent, with detailed Full HD images and a wide viewing angle, while the overall design, with its ultra slim bezel, is as smart as its feature set.



EUROPEAN HIGH-END TV 2014-2015

LG 77EC980V

With the 77EC980V, LG has aimed for the very best in performance and design – and succeeded. Mixing a curved form factor, proprietary WRGB OLED panel and Ultra HD resolution, this 77-inch high-end display offers consistently impressive images. OLED's self-emissive technology is key, ensuring astonishing, deep black levels, high peak brightness, and fast, clear motion. LG's Colour Refiner processing, meanwhile, expertly handles colours, and upscaled HD images are razor-sharp. Pictures can be viewed from a wide angle with little reduction in clarity or colour fidelity. Beyond its first-rate performance, the TV features everything LG currently has to offer, including its webOS smart platform, passive 3D, a full range of future-proof connections and a stylish, minimalist bezel design. In short, this is a reference-grade display.



EUROPEAN HT PROJECTOR 2014-2015

Epson EH-TW9200W

For film fans, a home cinema projector provides the ultimate experience, and Epson's EH-TW9200W combines exemplary large-screen visuals with easy setup and usability. This Full HD LCD model combines a 2,400 Lumens light output and dynamic 600,000:1 contrast ratio to create immersive images (including 3D), packed with detail and brightness, and its native motion performance can be further improved via the on-board Frame Interpolation system. Installation is aided by a 2.1x optical zoom, versatile vertical and horizontal lens shift controls, while a wireless HD transmitter allows users to view HD content without having to plug in other devices. Very quiet in operation, and with a smart-looking chassis, the Epson is a great addition to any cinema room.



EUROPEAN BLU-RAY PLAYER 2014-2015

Panasonic DMP-BDT700

Panasonic's range-topping Blu-ray player, the DMP-BDT700, focuses on bringing top-quality video – and audio – to a home theatre setup. For the latter, its improved UniPhier chipset separates processing of audio and video signals, with the video path able to be switched off entirely. The result is audiophile sound, delivered through discrete 7.1-channel analogue outputs and 192kHz/32-bit DACs, or via digital outputs. Picture and audio quality can be adjusted via in-depth tuning options – including colour and gamma settings – in a simple-to-use interface. Full HD Blu-ray images showcase impressive detail, and the DMP-BDT700 can upscale them to THX-certified 4K resolution. Additional features of this elegantly-designed player include external media playback from USB, SD card and a home network (with support for hi-res FLAC and WAV files), plus access to Panasonic's content-rich Viera Connect platform. Overall, this is a modern, forward-thinking disc player.



**EUROPEAN ON-WALL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM
2014-2015****DALI RUBICON LCR**

Part of the Danish brand's five-strong RUBICON series, this full-range on-wall speaker features a version of the high frequency module first heard in the company's EPICON line. This sees a 29mm soft dome tweeter allied to a 17x45mm ribbon tweeter, just 1mm thick, this hybrid module being 'rotatable' when used as centre-channel in a bid to disperse sound around the room and so avoid the traditional listening sweet-spot. A 16.5cm wood fibre cone takes on bass duties while two hidden bass-reflex ports running up the rear of the cabinet boost lower frequencies. A stylish and flexible speaker (it can also be used on a stand or shelf), the RUBICON LCR is a persuasive one-stop solution for both stereo and multichannel sound.

**Best
Product**
2014-2015ON-WALL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM
DALI RUBICON LCR

EUROPEAN HT HIGH END 2014-2015**Yamaha CX-A5000/MX-A5000**

Yamaha's flagship AV pre-/power amplifier combination from its AVENTAGE range features an 11.2-channel, 4K-compatible processor that offers state-of-the-art connectivity and all the features the serious home theatre fan could want, plus a heavyweight 11 x 150W power amp. The two separates, both of which employ rigid vibration-damped chassis, hook up via balanced XLR or cinch connections. In tandem they are exhilarating and able to enliven even the duldest-sounding speakers. The CX-A5000's parametric equaliser produces superb room correction, including extensive bass management, with all eleven channels individually assignable to suit a variety of configurations. Meanwhile, the MX-A5000 utilises its discrete amps to deliver astonishing levels of power. Overall, Yamaha's CX-A5000/MX-A5000 pairing makes a superb choice for a high-end home theatre.



EUROPEAN HT SOUNDBAR 2014-2015

Focal Dimension

When designing its premium HDMI 2.0-equipped soundbar, Focal naturally began with the drivers, producing a full-range wide-dispersion speaker just 3.6cm deep. The Dimension soundbar includes five of these ultra-thin drivers coupled to a 6 x 75W class D amplifier. Low frequencies up to 200Hz are mono reproduced by all the speakers except the center channel, with a bass reflex port tuned to 65Hz. The additional sixth amp can be used to power the optional external dual-driver subwoofer that integrates with the soundbar to form a soundbase design, and brings an even more impactful bass ideal for movie soundtracks and big orchestral pieces. Advanced DSP optimises the Dimension's performance to the listening environment, with phase and delay controls helping to control the 5.1 audio. And when you don't fancy a movie, the Dimension can also function as a direct music player via its AUX input and optional Bluetooth aptX connection.



Best Product
2014-2015

HT SOUNDBAR
Focal Dimension

EUROPEAN LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM 2014-2015

Bowers & Wilkins 683 S2 Theatre

Ever since the first 600-series loudspeakers were launched in 1995, B&W's most popular range has continued to be defined by its application of innovative technologies. The new 600 Series is no exception with all its models benefiting from the latest generation of woven Kevlar bass/mid cones that saw their debut some 20 years ago. In the slim 683 S2 floorstanders these Kevlar units are supplemented by a pair of aluminium bass drivers while the entire range of 683 S2, smaller 686 S2 wall-mountable surrounds and impressive HTM61 S2 centre speaker all feature B&W's latest decoupled double-dome aluminium tweeter. While the 683 S2 floorstanders would grace any high quality stereo set-up, in combination with the 686 S2, HTM61 S2 and ASW610XP subwoofer they make for a glorious multichannel speaker system.



Best Product
2014-2015

LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM
Bowers & Wilkins 683 S2 Theatre

EUROPEAN HT RECEIVER 2014-2015**Pioneer VSX-924**

A home theatre receiver that offers excellent value, Pioneer's VSX-924 is packed with up-to-date technologies, providing enthusiasts with HDMI 2.0/4K compatibility with 18Gbps bitrates and 4:4:4 colour sampling. This potent video stage is matched by Pioneer's signature sound. Advanced Energy Direct amplification (7 x 105W) and audiophile D/A circuitry – including a sophisticated ESS SABRE DAC – ensure multichannel movie soundtracks are rich and detailed. For music fans, the VSX-924 supports numerous file formats, even DSD, and connective options include both AirPlay and Bluetooth, plus full DLNA 1.5 compatibility. Meanwhile, the iControlAV5 app for tablet PCs and smartphones (iOS and Android) streamlines operation. An inspired product that delivers masses of high-end entertainment at a truly affordable price.



HT RECEIVER

Pioneer VSX-924



EUROPEAN HT SOLUTION 2014-2015
Philips Fidelio E5
 With its detachable wireless speakers, the Philips Fidelio E5 goes a step beyond a traditional home theatre solution, offering consumers the ability to switch effortlessly between normal stereo and a 4.1-channel surround experience. Switching is simple – just a matter of removing the two rear speakers from the top of the stereo cabinets and placing them in the surround positions. When reverting to two-channel playback, the speakers re-charge their batteries. The inclusion of aptX Bluetooth streaming, Dolby Digital/Pro-Logic II decoding and dual HDMI inputs transforms the Fidelio E5 into a versatile home theatre hub, and the performance from its soft dome tweeters, full-range drivers and separate wireless subwoofer is as accomplished with music as it is with movie and TV material. And not only does the E5 sound good – it's also beautifully made.

EISA AWARD Best Product 2014-2015
 HT SOLUTION
 Philips Fidelio E5



EUROPEAN HT SOUNDBASE 2014-2015
LG LAB540
 Not only is LG's LAB540 a slim soundbase speaker that fits neatly beneath a TV, it is also a complete home theatre 4.1 system, offering a 3D-compatible Blu-ray player, Smart TV functionality and audio playback. This king of convergence packs four speakers (40W per channel) into its main unit, joined by a wireless 160W subwoofer to ensure a deep, bass-rich performance.

An HDMI port and an optical audio input are provided for external connections, while networking with mobile devices is possible via DLNA, Wi-Fi, Wi-Fi Direct and Bluetooth. Drives and other mobile devices are supported through the USB port. With audio compatibility extending to popular formats such as AAC, FLAC and DTS-HD Master Audio, convenient control via LG's dedicated app and headphone listening courtesy of the Private Sound feature, the LAB540 is a remarkable all-in-one solution.

EISA AWARD Best Product 2014-2015
 HT SOUNDBASE
 LG LAB540

EUROPEAN CAMCORDER 2014-2015

Sony FDR-AX100

Owners of 4K/Ultra HD TVs can create their own 4K content with Sony's feature-packed camcorder. Employing a compact and lightweight design, but offering high-quality components, it provides filmmakers with a state-of-the-art creative tool. The Carl Zeiss Vario-Sonnar T* lens is joined by a 1-inch Exmor R CMOS sensor and provides 12x optical zoom. Several recording modes, three ND Filter Functions and easy-to-use adjustments that you usually would expect from a professional device give the user full control, while the pro-grade BIONZ X processor enables recording with 4K at 25fps, Full HD at 50fps in XAVCS format and capturing slow-motion footage at 100 fps. Meanwhile, the OLED viewfinder, Wi-Fi/NFC connection, SteadyShot image stabilisation and scene selection modes make the FDR-AX100E a pleasure to use. Short of 4K content? Not any more...



EUROPEAN LIFESTYLE CAMCORDER 2014-2015

Canon LEGRIA mini X

The second generation of this small scale camera takes Canon's original innovative concept even further. The LEGRIA mini X is multi talented, with the rotating touchscreen display ideal for taking video 'selfies', the adjustable stand allowing the camcorder to be placed on any surface, and the ultra wide angle 170 degree lens capturing all the action. Full HD video (25p or 50i) is delivered by Canon's F/2.8 lens and 1/2.3-type, 12.8-megapixel CMOS sensor in both MP4 and AVCHD codecs, together with uncompressed stereo LPCM audio from the internal microphone. Generous connectivity includes a 3.5mm jack for an external mic, headphone terminal, plus mini HDMI, mini USB and Wi Fi, allowing easy transfer of files. And with the latter, the LEGRIA mini X can be operated wirelessly from a smart device. Genuinely flexible, this is a perfect partner for your everyday adventures.

EUROPEAN PHOTO & VIDEO CAMERA 2014-2015

Panasonic LUMIX DMC-GH4

The Panasonic LUMIX GH4 is one of the most feature-heavy cameras on the market. The 16-megapixel Live MOS sensor captures high-quality still images and provides professional 4K video-recording capabilities. It allows users to shoot slow or fast-motion footage using a frame rate of between 2fps and 96fps. Audio can be recorded and monitored using an external microphone, and by using the optional interface it is possible to output high-quality, uncompressed 4K footage via micro-HDMI. The GH4 features a sharp OLED live viewfinder, and a bright 3-inch monitor, and the weather-sealed magnesium-alloy body was designed to withstand professional use.



And the rest of the EISA Awards from Hi-Fi, Photo, Mobile Devices and In-Car Electronics

Expert Group Hi-Fi

EUROPEAN STEREO SYSTEM 2014-2015
Marantz SA8005/PM8005

EUROPEAN DIGITAL SOURCE 2014-2015
Sony HAP-Z1ES

EUROPEAN HI-FI HEADPHONE 2014-2015
OPPO PM-1

EUROPEAN HIGH-END AUDIO 2014-2015
KEF Reference 5

EUROPEAN HIGH-END AUDIO
SOLUTION 2014-2015
Avantgarde Acoustic ZERO 1

EUROPEAN USB DAC 2014-2015
ASUS Essence III

EUROPEAN ANALOGUE SOURCE
2014-2015
Pro-Ject Xtension 9 Evolution Superpack

EUROPEAN COMPACT HI-FI SYSTEM
2014-2015
JBL Authentics L16

EUROPEAN MULTIROOM SYSTEM
2014-2015
Samsung M7

EUROPEAN HI-FI ACCESSORY 2014-2015
iFi nano iDSD

Expert Group Photo

EUROPEAN CONSUMER DSLR CAMERA
2014-2015
Canon EOS 1200D

EUROPEAN ADVANCED DSLR CAMERA
2014-2015
PENTAX K-3

EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL DSLR
CAMERA 2014-2015
Nikon D4s

EUROPEAN CONSUMER COMPACT
SYSTEM CAMERA 2014-2015
Olympus OM-D E-M10

EUROPEAN ADVANCED COMPACT
SYSTEM CAMERA 2014-2015
Fujifilm X-T1

EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL COMPACT
SYSTEM CAMERA 2014-2015
Sony Alpha 7R

EUROPEAN COMPACT CAMERA
2014-2015
Sony Cyber-shot RX100 III

EUROPEAN ADVANCED COMPACT
CAMERA 2014-2015
Panasonic LUMIX DMC-FZ1000

EUROPEAN TRAVEL COMPACT CAMERA
2014-2015
Panasonic LUMIX DMC-TZ60

EUROPEAN CONNECTED CAMERA
2014-2015
Samsung NX30

EUROPEAN DSLR LENS 2014-2015
Sigma 50mm F1.4 DG HSM [A]

EUROPEAN DSLR ZOOM LENS 2014-2015
Tamron 16-300mm F3.5-6.3 Di II VC PZD

EUROPEAN DSLR TELEPHOTO ZOOM
LENS 2014-2015
Tamron SP 150-600 mm F5-6.3 VC USD

EUROPEAN COMPACT SYSTEM LENS
2014-2015
Fujinon XF56mmF1.2 R

EUROPEAN COMPACT SYSTEM ZOOM
LENS 2014-2015
Olympus M.ZUIKO DIGITAL ED 12-40mm
F2.8

EUROPEAN PHOTO ACCESSORY
2014-2015
Manfrotto MT055CXPro4

EUROPEAN SMARTPHONE CAMERA
2014-2015
Samsung Galaxy K zoom

Expert Group Mobile Devices

EUROPEAN ADVANCED SMARTPHONE
2014-2015
LG G3

EUROPEAN CONSUMER SMARTPHONE
2014-2015
Huawei Ascend P7

EUROPEAN HEADPHONE 2014-2015
AKG K845BT

EUROPEAN TABLET 2014-2015
Sony Xperia Z2 Tablet

EUROPEAN MOBILE AUDIO SYSTEM
2014-2015
Harman Kardon Esquire Mini

EUROPEAN SMARTPHONE CAMERA
2014-2015
Samsung Galaxy K zoom

Expert Group Mobile Devices

EUROPEAN IN-CAR HD MEDIA PLAYER
2014-2015
Audison bit Play HD

EUROPEAN IN-CAR NAVI-MEDIA
SYSTEM 2014-2015
Pioneer AVIC-F60DAB

EUROPEAN IN-CAR AMPLIFIER 2014-
2015
MOSCONI GLADEN D2 100.4 DSP

EUROPEAN IN-CAR SPEAKER SYSTEM
2014-2015
Rainbow GL-C6.2

EUROPEAN IN-CAR SUBWOOFER
2014-2015
Morel ULTIMO 10 Titanium

EUROPEAN IN-CAR PREMIUM UPGRADE
2014-2015
Alpine X800D-ML

EUROPEAN IN-CAR INTEGRATION
2014-2015
Audison AP8.9 bit

EUROPEAN IN-CAR HIGH-END
COMPONENT 2014-2015
Ground Zero GZPC 163SQ-LTD



For further information about
EISA visit: www.eisa.eu



AV RECEIVERS

YAMAHA: 2014 - 2015 HOME CINEMA AMP MODELS

YAMAHA
RX-V377
BLACK | SILVER

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
AUG 2014



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

AVENTAGE
YAMAHA
RX-A1040 NEW
BLACK | SILVER

YAMAHA
RX-V477
BLACK | SILVER



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

AVENTAGE
YAMAHA
RX-A2040 NEW
BLACK | SILVER

YAMAHA
RX-V677
BLACK | SILVER

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
OCT 2014



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

AVENTAGE
YAMAHA
RX-A3040 NEW
BLACK | SILVER

DEDICATED HOME CINEMA

BIG SCREEN THRILLS IN YOUR HOME

SPITFIRE CINEMA
FIXED FRAME SCREEN NEW
92-INCH TO 150-INCH



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE



EPSON EH-TW6100
HD PROJECTOR

SPITFIRE CINEMA
TAB TENSION SCREEN NEW
92-INCH TO 120-INCH



EASY INSTALLATION
WIRELESS



EPSON EH-TW9200-W
HD PROJECTOR

SPITFIRE CINEMA
IN-CEILING SCREEN NEW
92-INCH TO 120-INCH



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE



SONY VPL-HW40ES NEW
HD PROJECTOR

5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGES

SURROUND SOUND: THE MONITOR AUDIO WAY

MONITOR AUDIO
RADIUS R90 HT1 NEW
BLACK | WHITE | WALNUT

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
OCT 2013



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

COMPACT YET
POWERFUL

MONITOR AUDIO
SILVER 6 AV12 NEW
2 GLOSS | 4 VENEER FINISHES

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
MAR 2014



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

PURE PERFORMANCE
NO COMPROMISE

MONITOR AUDIO
MASS 5.1
WHITE NEW | BLACK

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
AUG 2012



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

BEST FOR
BUDGET

5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGES

OUR TOP-SELLING SURROUND SOUND PACKAGES

Q ACOUSTICS Q70001
BLACK | WHITE

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
AUG 2013



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

2014 BEST SELLER
MULTI AWARD
WINNER

DALI ZENSOR 5 AV 5.1
BLACK | WHITE | WALNUT

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
NOV 2013



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

TANNOY MERCURY
V4i AV 5.1 NEW
MAPLE | DARK WALNUT

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND PICTURE
★★★★★
AUG 2011



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

TRADITIONAL STYLE
PURE PERFORMANCE

TV STANDS

HOUSE YOUR KIT WITH CLASS

JUST RACKS JRL-1101
WHITE | BLACK



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

PERFECT FOR
SOUNDBARS!



JUST RACKS JRA-150
GLOSS BLACK

ALPHASON FINWOODS
OAK | WALNUT | BLACK



TV BRACKET
OPTION



ALPHASON CHROMIUM
SIX COLOUR FINISHES

SPECTRAL SCALA
ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE!



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

BESPOKE
MODIFICATIONS



SPECTRAL BRICK
ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE!

HI-FI FURNITURE

THE BEST LOOKING AND THE BEST SOUNDING

CUSTOM DESIGN MILAN
SIX WOOD FINISHES



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BAMBOO | 3 FINISHES

SPECTRAL HIGH END
CLEAR | FROSTED | BLACK



ATACAMA ELITE ECO
BAMBOO | 3 FINISHES



SPECTRAL CD SHELIVING
CLEAR | FROSTED | BLACK

WALL
OR
FLOOR

0% Finance

0%

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MUSIC AS IT'S MEANT TO BE HEARD

**ROKSAN CASPIAN
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BLACK | SILVER

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2012
★★★★★ OCT 2013



0% FINANCE AVAILABLE

BUNDLE DEALS AVAILABLE

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2013
★★★★★ DEC 2011

**ROKSAN KANDY,
K2 CD & AMPLIFIER**
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**AUDIOLAB 8200 CD,
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WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2012
★★★★★ OCT 2013



0% FINANCE AVAILABLE

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2013
★★★★★ DEC 2011

**TEAC REFERENCE
AI501 / PD501HR
COMPACT HI-FI**
BLACK | SILVER

**MARANTZ 6005
CD & AMPLIFIER**
BLACK | SILVER

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2012
★★★★★ MAY 2014



WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2013
★★★★★ DEC 2011

**YAMAHA A-N500
CD & AMPLIFIER**
BLACK | SILVER

HI-FI SPEAKERS

THE LATEST AND GREATEST PAIRS OF LOUDSPEAKERS

**Q ACOUSTICS
CONCEPT 40**
BLACK | WHITE

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2014
★★★★★ MAY 2014

AWARD-WINNING 'CONCEPT' DESIGN



**MONITOR AUDIO
SILVER 10**
2 GLOSS
4 VENEER FINISHES

BEST FOR LARGE ROOMS



**WHARFEDALE
DIAMOND 121**
3 FINISHES

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2013
★★★★★ OCT 2013



DALI ZENSOR 1
3 FINISHES

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2011
★★★★★ AUGUST 2011



CABLES & INTERCONNECTS

THE CONNECTION IS MADE

**QED REFERENCE
AUDIO 40**
STEREO PHONO
RCA CABLE PAIR

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2012
★★★★★ OCT 2013



**AUDIOQUEST
FLX-SLIP 14/4
SPEAKER CABLE**

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2012
★★★★★ NOV 2012



**AUDIOQUEST
CINNAMON
HDMI CABLE**

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2011
★★★★★ JAN 2011



**WIREWORLD
STARLIGHT
HDMI CABLE**

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2013
★★★★★ MAY 2014



WIRELESS SPEAKERS

NO COMPLICATION, UTTERLY SIMPLE TO ENJOY

DALI KUBIK
RED | WHITE | BLACK

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2014
★★★★★ MAY 2014



Q ACOUSTICS BT-3
RED | WHITE | BLACK

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2014
★★★★★ MAY 2014



MONITOR AUDIO S300
WHITE | BLACK

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2014
★★★★★ MAY 2014



DENON ENVAYA
WHITE | BLACK

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2014
★★★★★ MAY 2014



**GENEVA LABS
MODEL S**
RED | WHITE | BLACK

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2014
★★★★★ MAY 2014



**BANG & OLUFSEN
BEOLIT12**
GREY | DARK GREY

WHAT HI-FI? STEREO AND VIDEO AWARDS 2014
★★★★★ MAY 2014



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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson realises he needs to make some environmental changes to his cinema room if he wants to carry on watching movies during a Summer heatwave

THE UNACCUSTOMED BOUT of warm weather at the end of July, previously known as 'Summer', has had a profoundly negative influence on home cinema entertainment at the Stevenson ranch. Not only has there been a veritable rash of weekends filled with friends trying to poison me with part-cooked, part-burnt pork products, the local hostelry has installed a potent and irresistible man-magnet. No, not Angelina Jolie in a catsuit, but those twin beacons of sanctuary on an unbearably hot Summer's day. Air-conditioning and cold beer.

The local beverage in question is Curious Brew from Kent's Chapel Down brewery [*are you hoping for a freebie? – Ed*]. It tastes staggeringly good on draught but not quite as appealing from a bottle at home. Meanwhile, newly-installed air-conditioning, apparently seconded from an industrial meat-processing facility, keeps the bar comfortably chilled. Stepping inside from the 30-degree beer garden was like wafting into an oasis of cool.

Hi-def hot-house

Compare and contrast with this weekend's lack of social engagements and subsequent decision to watch a movie. Powering up my seven amps and AV processor a couple of hours in advance, to stabilise the sound, may not have been a wise idea. They idled away, turning several hundred Watts of EON's finest into heat. The sun pounding into the back of the black-out blinds didn't help either, its dark fabric turning into a giant griddle that crisped small flying bugs on contact. The cinema wall clock indicated a temperature approaching 36 degrees. I'm pretty sure it was fibbing on the low side just to get us in.

And what is it with modern, energy-efficient fridges? They just don't work when the air temp gets anything above British Spring-time ambient. Stuff

the ozone layer – just give me an old-fashioned CFC-packed fridge that would freeze a pint of milk in minutes if you nudged the thermostat down a bit too far. In the heat of this Summer my modern fridge couldn't get the chiller compartment below eight degrees. That is no temperature for a lager.

Now, Mrs S wasn't too keen on warm Pinot Grigio in a darkened oven for two hours, but I managed to lure her in with *After Earth* on Blu-ray. Alas, this flawed and predictable sci-fi yarn starring Will Smith was not the engaging movie required to take one's mind off soggy armpits, tepid refreshments and a growing line of dead insects by the window. **As the credits rolled I crawled out of the room on all fours, gagging for air.**

The thing is, I lambasted fellow HCC scribe Steve May when he installed air-conditioning in his cinema room some time ago. The issue with air-con, I stated righteously, was that its operating noise diminishes the dynamic range of the sound system and was, *vis-à-vis*, badder than a very bad thing. Even the quietest AC units are just too noisy. Of course, halfway through *After Earth* I would have gladly installed a diesel generator and a band saw if they'd promised to dig up an icy breeze from somewhere.

So in this column I have not one but two new points of view to share with you. The first is that just in case the UK gets another day at over 30 degrees in the next decade or so, budgeting for a good-quality, low-noise air-conditioning system in your cinema room is not actually a bad idea. The second and rather more radical notion is that should this Summer continue its run of unseasonably warm weather, you should skip the home cinema altogether and go down the pub instead ■

Have you got air-con in your cinema room? Or a fridge? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Richard Stevenson has put his cinema's Dolby Atmos makeover on hold and is now trying to get planning permission for a pub in his garden



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